



*Sacred Tropes:
Tanakh, New Testament,
and Qur'an as Literature
and Culture*



EDITED BY
ROBERTA STERMAN SABBATH

BRILL

Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and
Qur'an as Literature and Culture

Biblical Interpretation Series

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ibrahim Abraham is a Ph.D. student in the Sociology Department of the University of Bristol, UK. He has published articles in journals including the *Australian Religion Studies Review*, *The Bible and Critical Theory and Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* as well as chapters in books including *The Politics of Representation*.

Mehnaz M. Afridi teaches Judaism and Islam. Her current work is on Modern Jewish Diaspora in Europe and Modern Islamic Identity. Her research is focused on literature and religion. She is currently serving on the steering committee for WISE, an initiative that seeks to create the first Muslim woman's Shura council, Arava Institute that seeks to create peace through the environment amongst Israelis and Arabs, and the Muslims for Progressive Values that focus on human rights for all people.

George Aichele recently retired from teaching at Adrian College. A member of the Bible and Culture Collective, the group author of *The Postmodern Bible* (Yale UP, 1995), he has written and edited numerous books and articles on the Bible, semiotics, and popular culture, including *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Trinity Press International, 2001), and *The Phantom Messiah: Postmodern Fantasy and the Gospel of Mark* (T&T Clark, 2006). He is also book review editor for *The Bible and Critical Theory*.

Kecia Ali is the author of *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oneworld, 2006) and several articles exploring the intersections of classical texts with contemporary discourses about women and gender. Her forthcoming book focuses on marriage in early Islamic jurisprudence. Before joining Boston University's Department of Religion, Ali taught at Harvard Divinity School and Brandeis University. She obtained her Ph.D. from Duke University.

Viviana Díaz Balsera is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Miami in Florida. She is the author of *Calderón y las quimeras de la Culpa: alegoría, seducción y resistencia en cinco autos sacramentales*

(Purdue University Press, 1997), and of *The Pyramid Under the Cross: Franciscan Discourses of Evangelization and the Nahua Christian Subject in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (University of Arizona Press, 2005). She is currently writing *Guardians of Idolatry: the Conservation of a Mesoamerican Marvelous in Colonial Central Mexico*, a book on Nahua sorcerers as agents of cultural resistance.

Betsy J. Bauman-Martin received her Ph.D. in Ancient History from the University of California, Irvine and is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at St. Norbert College in De Pere, WI, where she teaches courses in biblical studies and women's studies. She has published articles primarily on 1 Peter and co-edited, with Robert Webb, the recent *Reading First Peter with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the First Epistle of Peter* (T&T Clark, 2007). She is currently researching for a book-length postcolonial analysis of 1 Peter.

Wendy Laura Belcher is Assistant Professor in the Princeton Department of Comparative Literature and Center for African American Studies. She specializes in medieval, early modern, and modern African literature. She is completing, with Thomas A. Hale, an anthology titled *Early African Literature: The Written Roots from 3000 BCE to 1900 CE*. She is also writing a book on the circulation of Ethiopian discourse in medieval European and early modern British literature.

Roland Boer is Research Professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He has written numerous books, articles and magazine pieces. The most recent books are *Criticism of Heaven* (2007), *Symposia* (2007), *Rescuing the Bible* (2007) and *Last Stop Before Antarctica* (2008) as well as the edited book with Jorunn Økland, *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible* (2008). Forthcoming are *Political Myth* (2009) and *Criticism of Religion* (2009).

Jonathan Bordo (M.A. M.Phil., Ph.D. Philosophy, Yale) is a cultural theorist with a special interest in the study of art, monuments and symbolic forms. His essays have been published widely and well, and he has lectured extensively in North America, Northern Europe and the Antipodes. He is currently completing a multi-volume study of the wilderness entitled *The Landscape without a Witness*, one volume of which will be published as *Wilderness as Symbolic Form* by Rodopi in 2009. His most recent essay "The Homer of Potsdamerplatz" appears

in *Images—A Journal of Jewish Art History and Visual Culture* (2008). This essay is a contribution to *The Specular Witness*, a collection of essays on art, testimony and civic society. He is a professor of cultural theory and philosophy at Trent University.

Jessie Cheney teaches in the Department of Liberal Studies at Roosevelt University. She is the author of “‘If the Words be Well Understood,’ Or, Why Did John Cotton Accuse Anne Hutchinson of Adultery?” (*Religion and Literature*, December, 2004). Currently, she is working on a book based on her dissertation that establishes an interpretive framework for understanding early American writing on marriage and sexuality.

Ngwarsungu Chiwengo, Professor of English at Creighton University, has published articles on African, African American, and American literatures, animation film, and human rights discourse. She recently published *Understanding Cry, the Beloved Country*, “Memory, Ideology, and Exile: J. M. Kibushi’s Mwana Mboka” in *Reconstruction* and “When Wounds and Corpses Fail to Speak: Narratives of Violence and Rape in Congo (DRC)” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. She is currently working on a book project on Peter Abrahams.

Colleen M. Conway is Professor of Religious Studies at Seton Hall University. She is author of *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford Press, 2008), which examines the way the New Testament authors responded to cultural ideals about manliness in their presentations of Jesus. She is also the author of several studies that explore the literary and historical aspects of the Gospel of John, including *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Scholars Press, 1999).

Christine Dykgraaf is an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Near Eastern Studies and a Ph.D. candidate in Library Science at The University of Arizona. She has authored articles and book reviews, including “Metaphorical and Literal Depictions of the Desert in the Qur’an” in *Arid Lands Newsletter* (November–December 2001) and “Middle East Collection Librarianship: The State of the Art,” *MELA Notes* No. 75–76 (Fall 2002–Spring 2003). She plans to defend her dissertation, “The Current Status of Middle East Collections in the United States”, in August 2009.

Bruce Fudge is Assistant Professor of Arabic in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Ohio State University. He has published articles on qur'anic exegesis and both medieval and modern Arabic literature. His current work focuses on the relation of knowledge and narrative in medieval Arabic prose.

Aisha Geissinger is an Assistant Professor in the Religion Program at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. She has written "The Exegetical Traditions of A'isha: Notes on Their Impact and Significance," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* (Edinburgh) 6.1 (2004) and "The Portrayal of Hajj as a Context for Women's Exegesis: Textual Evidence in al-Bukhari's (d. 870 CE) *Sahih*," in *Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Guenther (Brill, 2005). Having obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, she is currently working on a book based on her dissertation that examines the textual functions of the traditions attributed to early Muslim women which are quoted in many medieval Qur'an commentaries.

Rosalind Ward Gwynne, author of *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's Arguments*, attended Portland State College (now University), including a year studying Arabic at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in Shīmlan, Lebanon, then graduate school at the University of Washington. She studied manuscripts with George Makdisi, then received a Fulbright to Yemen for the same purpose. In 1981 she came to teach Arabic at the University of Tennessee, joining the Department of Religious Studies in 1987.

Gottfried Hagen (Ph.D. Free University of Berlin, 1996) is Associate Professor of Turkish Language and Culture in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan. He studies Ottoman Turkish understandings of time and space through historiography, cosmography, and religious narratives. He has published widely, including *Ein osmanischer Geograph bei der Arbeit, Entstehung und Gedankenwelt von Kâtib Çelebis Ġihānnümā*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2003). He is currently working on a study of Ottoman writings about the Prophet Muhammad.

Peter Heath is Chancellor of the American University of Sharjah and Professor, Department of Arabic & Translation Studies. His publications

include *The Thirsty Sword. Sirat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Utah UP, 1996) and *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina), with a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Pennsylvania UP, 1992); and over thirty articles on subjects in Arabic literature and Islamic thought.

Thomas Hoffmann is Research Assistant Professor at The Centre for European Islamic Thought, University of Copenhagen. He holds an M.A. in comparative religion and a Ph.D. for the dissertation *The Poetic Qur'ân: Studies on Qur'ânic Poeticity* (Harrassowitz: 2007). His research is in Qur'ânic studies and European Islam. Other publications in English are "The Poetics of Self-referential Refutations in the Qur'an", in *Self-referentiality in the Qur'an*, ed. S. Wild (Harrassowitz, 2007); "Ritual Poeticity in the Qur'an," in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* VI, issue 2 (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

J'annine Jobling is an Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Liverpool Hope University. She works in the crossover between philosophical, theological, and literary texts. She is author of *Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Theological Context* (Ashgate, 2002); she has co-edited *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence* (Palgrave, 2008), *Theological Liberalism* (SPCK, 2000) and *Theology and the Body* (Gracewing, 1999). She has recently written about theological themes in the work of novelists such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Iris Murdoch, and Anthony Burgess. Her current projects include a book on spirituality and fantasy fiction.

William W. Kimbrel, Jr. (Ph.D., UMass-Amherst, 1992) was Assistant Professor of American and English literature at Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait at the time of his death in November 2007. His career spanned the US, the UK, China, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Levant. An NEH grant recipient and Fulbright Senior Scholar, his specialties were Hemingway, biography, and narrative theory. His work appears in *American National Biography*, *Bloom's How to Write about Ernest Hemingway*, *The Hemingway Review*, *Massachusetts Studies in English*, and *Probing the Boundaries: Making Sense of Dying and Death*. With John Wall of Eastern Mediterranean University, he edited *Confrontations: Essays in the Polemics of Narration*, an international collection addressing war and literature and the desperate need for universal civil dialogue.

Marianna Klar obtained her D.Phil. from Pembroke College, Oxford in 2002. She is currently Research Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies, SOAS, University of London. Publications include *Interpreting al-Tha'labi's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2009), "Stories of the Prophets", in *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. A. Rippin (Blackwell, 2006) and "And We cast upon the throne a mere body: A Historiographical Reading of Q. 38:34", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6.1 (2004).

Jennifer L. Koosed is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, the body, as well as the intersections of the Bible and popular culture. Her first book (*Per*)mutations of *Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book* (Continuum, 2006) looked at Ecclesiastes through feminist and poststructuralist lenses. She is currently writing a book about Ruth.

Kathleen Lundeen is Professor of English at Western Washington University. She is a specialist in British Romantic literature and has published on Blake, Keats, Hemans, and Austen, as well as on literature and science, intermedia studies, and film. She is the author of *Knight of the Living Dead: William Blake and the Problem of Ontology* (Susquehanna, 2000) and is currently writing a book that examines cosmology in England during the Romantic Era.

William Thomas McBride is Associate Professor of English at Illinois State University where he teaches film, drama, and hermeneutics. Most relevant publications include: "Figura Preserves: History (in) Ajar" in *Maps and Mirrors: Topologies of Art and Politics*, ed. Steve Martinot (Northwestern University Press, 2001); "Esther Passes. Chiasm, Lex Talio and Money in the Book of Esther" in *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, eds. Jason Rosenblatt and Joseph Sitterson (Indiana University Press, 1991). McBride is currently writing a film textbook entitled *Stylized Moments: Turning Film Style Into Meaning*.

Beth E. McDonald is an Adjunct Professor of Composition and World Literature in the English department at University of Nevada Las Vegas. She is the author of *The Vampire as Numinous Experience:*

Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004); and her article “The Vampire as Trickster Figure in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” was published in *Extrapolation* (Kent State University, 1992). In addition, she serves as a reader for *The Journal of Dracula Studies*, a publication of the Canadian Chapter of the Transylvanian Society of Dracula and as editor of the literary journal *wordriver* (UNLV English department).

Mustansir Mir teaches Islamic studies at Youngstown State University in Ohio. He is the author of *Understanding the Islamic Scripture: A Study of Selected Passages from the Qur’an* and *Tulip in the Desert: A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal*.

Stephen D. Moore is Professor of New Testament at the Theological School, Drew University. He has authored and edited many books, most recently *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006) and *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, co-edited with Fernando Segovia (T&T Clark International, 2005). His current project, co-edited with Mayra Rivera, is *Planetary Loves: Gayatri Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

Andrew Hock Soon Ng teaches contemporary and postcolonial literature at Monash University Malaysia, and is the author of *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives* (2004) and *Interrogating Interstices* (2007), as well as the editor of *Asian Gothic* (2008) and *The Poetics of Shadows* (2008). His essays have appeared in journals such as *Contemporary Literature*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Mosaic* and *Women’s Studies*. He is currently completing a manuscript on the representation of religion in Anglophone Malaysian literature.

Andrew Rippin is Professor of Islamic History and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Victoria, Canada. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2006. He is the author of *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (third edition Routledge 2005) and *The Qur’an and its Interpretative Tradition* (Ashgate 2001).

Magda Romanska is Assistant Professor of Theatre at Emerson College, and Research Associate at Harvard Davis Institute for Russian and

Eurasian Studies. Her articles have appeared in or are forthcoming in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, *Slovo*, *Gender Forum*, and *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Her two recent book chapters have been published in anthologies *Ghosts, Stories, Histories* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2007), and *The Cultural Politics of Heiner Muller* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2008). Her current projects are *Polish Theatre: The Untold Chapters*, and *Necro-Ophelia, Death, Femininity and the Making of Modern Aesthetics*.

Alan Roughley is the Chief Executive of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation in Manchester, England and a part-time Associate Professor in English at Liverpool Hope University. Alan's interest in the relationships between the Bible, Literature and Philosophy increased when he studied with Northrop Frye at the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University. Alan has written and published extensively on James Joyce, and his "Reading Derrida Reading Joyce" was one of the first major studies of the relationship between Jacques Derrida and James Joyce.

Roberta Sterman Sabbath teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her articles include "Moses, Moses Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, Moses Joyce: The Blooming Jews Advice to Stephan Dedalus" in *Irish Studies Quarterly* and "Wonder and the Jewish Experience in Early Modern Europe: Sabatai Zvi and Moses Mendelssohn" in *A Sudden Surprise of the Soul: The Passion of Wonder in Philosophy, Literature, and Theology between the 16th and 18th Centuries* (Wipf & Stock; Peeters 2009) Her current project is *Re-Membering the Body: Figurative Readings of the Jewish Sense of Wonder*, a monograph.

Regina M. Schwartz is Professor of English and Law at Northwestern University. She has written, most recently, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, 2008), *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997), and *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theodicy and Poetics* (winner of the James Holly Hanford Book Prize). She has edited, among other collections, *Transcendence: Philosophy, Theology and Literature Approach the Beyond* (Routledge, 2004).

Robert Paul Seesengood is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania. His first book was *Competing Identities: The Athlete and the Gladiator in Early Christianity* (T&T Clark, 2006). He is presently at work on a survey of Pauline scholarship for Blackwell (forthcoming in 2009). He and Jennifer Koosed are also co-writing a monograph on Jesse James, Jesus of Nazareth and King David titled *Jesse's Lineage* (T&T Clark).

Yvonne Sherwood is Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Bible at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Previous publications include *The Prostitute and the Prophet* (T&T Clark, 1996; repr. 2004), *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge, 2000), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (Routledge: 2004, co-edited with Kevin Hart) and *Derrida's Bible* (ed.; Palgrave, 2004). She is currently writing a cultural history of the akedah/the 'sacrifice' of Isaac, concentrating on histories of secularisation and ways in which the Bible has been politically and culturally reconfigured.

Ken Stone is Professor of Bible, Culture and Hermeneutics at Chicago Theological Seminary. He is the author of, among other texts, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (2005); and is currently doing research on biblical interpretation and the question of the animal.

Marvin A. Sweeney is Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Claremont School of Theology and Professor of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. He also serves as Professor of Bible at the Academy for Jewish Religion, California. He is the author of some ten volumes, most recently, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Fortress, 2008). His current projects include a Jewish biblical theology, commentaries on Ezekiel and Isaiah 40–66, and a survey of Jewish mysticism. In addition, he serves as editor of *Hebrew Studies: A Journal Devoted to Hebrew Language and Literature*, and Chief Executive Officer of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research, Claremont.

Ruth Tsoffar is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature & Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is the author of *The Stains of Culture: Karaite Jewish Women in the Bay*

Area (an Ethno-Reading), the Elli Kongas Miranda Award in American Folklore Society. She is currently at work on a manuscript entitled *Cannibal Ideology: Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Colonialism in Hebrew Literatures*.

Jay Twomey is an Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati, where he teaches courses in the Bible and literature, literary theory, and American literature. His areas of interest include the reception of the Pauline corpus, biblical rewrites, and cultural studies. He has published on relevant topics in such journals as *Biblical Interpretation, Religion and Literature*, and *Religion and the Arts*. His first book, *The Pastoral Epistles Through the Centuries* (Blackwell), was published in 2009. He is currently at work on his next project, a monograph tentatively entitled *Radical Paulitics: Readings of Paul in Contemporary Culture*.

John C. Ulreich is a Professor of English at the University of Arizona. He regularly teaches courses at the graduate and undergraduate level on the Renaissance and on the literature and history of the Bible. He has published extensively on John Milton. He has also published essays on George Herbert, Edmund Spenser, Owen Barfield, and Sir Philip Sidney. His current research interest centers on the Gospel Harmonies produced at Little Gidding.

Andrew Wernick is Professor of Cultural Studies and Sociology at Trent University, Canada. A social theorist, cultural critic, intellectual historian, and sometime musician, his writings include *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (1991), *Shadow of Spirit: Religion and Postmodernism* (co-edited with Philippa Berry) (Routledge, 1993), *Images of Aging* (co-edited with Mike Featherstone) (Routledge, 1994), and *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-theistic Project of French Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

PREFACE

A core group of essays in this collection sprang from the exchange of ideas concerning sacred texts and literary theory during a series of panels spread over a three year period. These contributors presented their papers for panels of the Modern Language Association, American Comparative Literature Association, Pacific Ancient and Modern Literary Association, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Forum Lecture series. Because of the breadth, diversity, and quality of the essays and with their comparatist nature and inclusive spirit, other contributors joined the core group to create this collection. The spirit of the collection provides a coherence embraced by all the contributors who enlist a variety of interpretive approaches, often within one essay. They mine sacred texts for meaning and, with the deep excavation, reveal veins of thought that ironically are often as not picked up, quite independently, by other contributors in other essays.

Essays are relatively short with minimal use of specialized language. The goal is to bring the richness of sacred text interpretation to both the initiate and the scholar. The hope is that the work will be used in classrooms to broaden understanding of all three sacred texts and to find ways that they in turn speak to each other. The number of essays is balanced between the sacred texts, often with an essay referring to two or three sacred texts.

All the contributors are at once honored and grateful that Brill and the Biblical Interpretation Series editor, Alan Culpepper, recognized that the collection can be an important resource in the classroom and the conference hall to examine the relationship between the monotheistic religions. Their decision has provided the platform from which our voices can be heard. We are grateful for the comprehensive work completed by Thomas Broughton-Willett in making the index reflect the thoughtful literary perspective that we had hoped to achieve with this project and which we feel we have now achieved. Special thanks to Stephen Moore and David Damrosch for their generous advice. My gratitude goes to the many colleagues, family members, and friends who continued to believe in the project from the beginning and whose ideas, encouragement, and vision continue to inspire.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Tanakh.¹ New Testament. Qur'an. Most often, studies of these works appear alone. Often the Tanakh and New Testament are paired for independent analysis of each. Very often, the older work is studied as a foreshadowing of the future. Libraries are filled with these individualized or paired studies. Religious and literary studies in academe reflect the same compartmentalization, specializing in studies of each.

Today's geopolitical global economy of ideas and markets flies in the face of any cloistering of sacred texts. In this age of cyberspace transmission, the mobility of ideas produces their easy flow around the world. Yet, nativism, isolationism, and chauvinism of every kind have never been more entrenched. For both reasons, the one, because of the logistic ease of communication, and the other, because of current political and religious turmoil, the study of the interaction between the texts is a project whose time has come.

One antidote to the individualized or paired groupings of sacred text studies would be to anthologize an equal number of studies from each of the three sacred texts. Essays could be organized by sacred text. First, Tanakh. Next, New Testament. Then, Qur'an. Or, organized by period, ex: patriarchs, exodus, or by topics, ex: family relations, ethics. But essays collected in such ways can produce a tokenism that continues the status quo. Readers are more comfortable with the familiar. Less well-known sacred text references would be ignored while the familiar ones emphasized. In the classroom, teachers gravitate to material they know. The result is to reinforce the same age-old, categorical way of thinking.

Preventing the three texts from having a conversation with one another is like frustrating the otherwise unleashed excitement and energy of old friends who have been distanced by time, space, and squabbling families. Putting them together under one roof produces

¹ The three sacred texts are here called by their religious names. Often the name "Hebrew Bible" or "Old Testament" is used instead of Tanakh, the appropriate title that reflects the five books of Moses, the histories and prophets, and the wisdom literature.

an explosion of creativity, energy, and pleasure. Putting them together on an equal playing field guarantees the freedom that only trust can produce.

None of these works is a relic, an artifact testifying to a dead culture. They are alive and pertinent to the people of the modern world. They are looked to by billions of people for wisdom, for meaning to life's puzzles, trials, and joys, and for the pleasures of spirituality, of intellect, of adventure. Adding another dimension to this fertile field increases, not diminishes, the magnetism.

Tanakh-New Testament-Qur'an punctuates the synergy between the three works experienced by the contributors in this collection. Without a doubt, there is an idealism sandwiched between these covers. An idealism that acknowledges, even cherishes and celebrates, a difference that enriches, not diminishes, communal life. On a down-to-earth level, contributors represent every corner of the globe testifying to the dynamism of these sacred works and underscoring the vibrant nature of the conversation amongst them.

When this call for papers went out, these contributors "showed up" in the cyber neighborhood that we inhabit without prodding and with great enthusiasm and an idea that needed air, fresh air. Often, the response was, "I've had this essay in my drawer just awaiting the right home." While essays may focus on one, two, or three sacred texts, the invitation to use mixed approaches has produced the foundation for an exciting playing field. The collection is a global airing of sorts. It is a way for scholars to be vessels for the delayed conversation, one that has been inhibited by old ways and habits.

Prior to the last third of the 20th century, literary and religious studies scholars often prescribed a focus on the text itself, a text accepted as a discrete artifact. Then the literary earthquake that broke the crust of the work-encapsulated-in-time-and-space began. Authors in this collection have all benefited from that intense theoretical work of the last part of the 20th century and the willingness of religious and literary studies scholars to apply literary theory to sacred texts.

The application of a fresh theoretical lens to a sacred text proved an exciting turn. During this period, scholars applied one theory to mine a text for an underlying meaning that fit that theory. Results provided break through readings. New readers and readings, both lay and scholarly, emerged. A quick visit to commercial bookstores and academic libraries alike reveals shelf after shelf of space reflecting diverse inter-

pretive vibrancy. This period can be described as the modernist phase of literary theory. A scholar was aligned with one theory or another and served as guide, enlightening the uninitiated.

The call for papers for this collection asked for something else. A scholar could apply polymorphous readings that incorporated fields of literature, philosophy, history, popular culture, law, and anthropology. The charge was to have the scholar serve not as guide but as participant in the exploration of meaning and to bring the reader along as a willing adventurer. A global dimension became a critical part of this collection embracing the reception of these texts in the greatest variety of time and space, culture and politics, individual and communal practice.

Contributors who answered the call offered just such a rich portrait of the sacred texts. Collectively and individually, they enlisted a variety of scholarly strategies, testifying to the dynamic nature of these three texts and the ways they interact with one another. There was no, “A Semiotic Reading” or “A New Historicist Look.” Rather the familiar literary theories were often brought in as a team to make connections, to broaden exploration and audiences, and to discover rhetorical power; in short, to reveal the magnetism that keeps readers coming.

Many of these essays spring from academic panels on this topic organized over the past four years at several literary conferences. During each of these years, about a dozen or so scholars traveled, often from afar, in response to a door wedged open by universities and literary studies organizations serving as hosts to the panels. The virtual community that these panels generated has operated within the safe landscape of academe, a real community to be cherished.

To establish a sense of community in the discussion of these three sacred texts, six themes organize the conversation. Each theme represents a layer of the universal human experience. The journey begins with the theme that examines the most completely internalized of all the dimensions, that of language, a focus reflecting the title of this collection, *Sacred Tropes*.

The journey continues with the next theme that describes the spiritual human experience; followed by the next theme, the experience of the body and environmental landscape; then the next, the experience of the composite of the previous three layers—language, spirituality, and the body—addressing the complex internal life of the individual; the next, the dynamic of the individual and the immediate social context;

and the final theme, the largest frame, that of the relationship of the individual with the larger community politic.

Part I: According to the wisdom of philosophers, literary scholars, and psychologists alike, language is the vehicle that mediates the individual human experience within time and space. Language is the two-way street that both enables the individual to express and to integrate. Thus the dimension of focus on language and rhetorical expression of these sacred works is the first organizing theme, *Poetics*.

Part II: Spirituality is personal, some would say, more personal than language. Like language, spirituality serves as another mediating mechanism between the material world and all that is not material: all that imagination, all that wonderment, all that fear that defines our common human experience. The theme *Negotiating Boundaries: Crossings and Defining the Human and Divine* explores the expression of that mediation as voiced in the sacred texts.

Part III: The literal dividing line between our individual selves and the rest of time and space is our skin. In the environmental context of the earth, the topography of the planet stands in as the dividing line between the chaotic forces of the underworld and the potential civilizing order of the world above ground, and possibly, depending on the cultural context, the heavens above. The sacred texts pay a lot of attention to the skin and topography. Both skin and topography are the site of ritual and power. Often, in the sacred texts, they share the very same metaphors and narrative purpose so much so that the one often stands in for the other in production of rhetorical meaning. *Topographies: Landscape and Body* explores these two related expressions of boundary, those of skin and topography, both porous, between the human experience and the divine.

Part IV: For the individual experience of being alive, that powerful force charged with integrating what lies beneath and outside the skin, is often conveniently labeled "subjectivity." Subjectivity is the helpful word that acknowledges the impact of time and space to the experience of being human. It acknowledges that selfhood is no static matter. It is neither, on the one hand, completely bequeathed, nor, on the other hand, completely controllable. Subjectivity has a dynamic dimension that is portrayed in the sacred texts and is addressed by the theme, *Subjectivity*.

Part V: As a product of being alive, the dynamic "I," the subject, experiences intercourse with other subjects, other "I"'s. Demands of socialization intimately affect daily life. Each dynamic "I" or subject is

valued within each of these organizing categories, one way or another. The theme *Gift and Sacrifice* explores ways sacred texts describe and prescribe the value assigned to individual subjects.

Part VI: In order to explore the tectonic configuration of the human experience, authors look at a variety of historical and political patterns and events, including contemporary ones. In *Imperialism, Revolution, and Community*, contributors examine rhetorical messages gleaned from the works by various political communities, messages that helped form organizational roadmaps in the construction and maintenance of their societies.

Contributors were unaware of the decision to group the essays within a configuration of these six themes. Thus none of the essays was written for a prescribed purpose. As a result, the essays represent the broadest possible sweep of polymorphous readings. For every volunteer, there has been a unique blend of readings; for every essay, a fresh view into the complexity of interpretation.

Without this invitation of freedom in the choice of literary strategies, any group of essays might result in a reading reflecting a tunnel vision bequeathed by earlier practices. In her essay, Yvonne Sherwood advocates the charge of this volume which is to combine literary theories for analyzing sacred texts. While Sherwood testifies to the “trickling of influence between the Bible and Literature that has always been going on,” she bemoans the enduring problem that results when solo critical readings ignore textual richness. “[Individual readings work] like a net; they catch some aspects of the prophetic corpus and let others fall to the ground.”

Contributor Mustansir Mir echoes Sherwood’s commitment to literary criticism and to the use of a rich array of literary theory, suggesting its importance in Qur’anic studies. He opines, “The Qur’an, like the Bible, is an acknowledged literary masterpiece. But, unfortunately, it has not yet received the kind of attention... [as does] the Bible.”²

What Sherwood and Mir call for is the goal of this collection. Rather than submit these sacred texts to a net that filters out all but the seamless and beatific, or the persuasive and powerful, these articles suggest a few of the many lenses that bring sacred texts to life.

² Mir, Mustansir, “The Qur’an as Literature,” *Religion and Literature*, 20 (1988) 1: 49–64.

By applying contemporary reception to these sacred texts, contributors help us read against the grain of accepted or familiar interpretations. These texts continue to speak to us individually and through our institutions. By hearing these new voices of polymorphous interpretation, the reader opens up to fresh conclusions, fresh judgments, and hopefully fresh bridges of understanding and acceptance.

The sequence of the six themes, explored through the rich variety of voices included in this collection, forms the journey summarized below. It tells the story of the human condition inspired by the Abrahamic tradition as read through its sacred texts. The journey is a testimony to human resilience, imagination, and search for meaning. From the communal perspective, these essays serve as a reminder that living includes not only daily life within the boundaries prescribed by institutions but in the crossings of those boundaries. This collection attempts to articulate some of those internal experiences along with the crossings.

Part I. In his introduction to the section on *Poetics*, Peter Heath reminds us of the rhetorical or persuasive aspect of sacred language and the many different strategies used to achieve that purpose. The title of this collection enlists the Greek word “trope,” meaning “turn twist,” to highlight the lively activity between the innocent or literal meaning and the plethora of meanings and associations of a word, phrase, or pattern of language.³

To make their case, sacred texts rely on numerous figures of speech, many of which are described in the Qur’anic analysis of Mustansir Mir. Rhetorical persuasion also depends on patterns of language. Rosalind Gwynne examines the patterns in Qur’anic language to describe divine presence and power. Thomas Hoffman focuses on Qur’anic verbs and predicates used to portray the awesome nature of divine dynamics and power.

Figures of speech present complicated sets of references and meanings. A typical sacred text selection will shift registers between literal and figurative meanings, often producing dramatically different and even contradictory interpretations. To say that only one register is the right one misses textual richness. Jessie Cheney advises the reader to be

³ McLaughlin, Thomas, “Figurative Language,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990), 81.

aware of the numerous and sometimes subtle shifts between the literal and the figurative layers of meaning production (see Ulreich). William Kimbrel explains the powerfully persuasive New Testament rhetoric and commentary of typology that constructs Tanakh narrative as prophetic of New Testament events and revelations (see Geissinger, Ulreich).

Speaking to the political and cultural rhetorical power and purpose produced by these works, both Bruce Fudge and Mehnaz M. Afridi reflect on the selective references made to the Qur'an proving that interpretation and translation are always subjective and determined by the reader. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng points out the gothic language used to great emotional purpose. He discusses cultural and religious oppositions portrayed through sibling conflicts (see Belcher and Boer/Abraham).

Yvonne Sherwood seeks to broaden the view of the prophetic works. She challenges critical readings limited to the seamless and beatific in prophetic rhetoric and emphasizes the richness of the rough-hewn, often erratic and changeable, writing style. Sherwood compares the language of John Donne's poetry to the fleshy, visceral, baroque style of the Prophets.

Part II. Writing the introduction to *Negotiating Boundaries: Crossing and Defining the Human and the Divine*, Andrew Rippin suggests that language is the most human of tools serving to calm the tension and breach the isolation produced by a separation between the human and the divine (see Chiwengo). Taken as a sign, the boundary that marks that separation becomes a battle ground, bedroom, boardroom, public square, written page, or language itself.

This theme discusses ways the sacred texts portray the encounter between the human and divine. Some encounters spring from the folklore that informs sacred texts. Beth McDonald explores the at once reviled and beloved Lilith, name for Adam's independent, first wife. This portrait from Midrash (Jewish extra-biblical narratives) attests to the imaginative human need to create an identity for forces unexplained by human reason (see Fudge, Hagen, Seesengood/Koosed).

Some of the human-divine encounters described in the text suggest that the boundary between the human and divine moves. Expectations for divine behavior change. The human spirit is filled with hope or devastation. Marvin Sweeney examines the development of Abraham's conversation with a divine presence, creating, in the end, a sense of

trust on the part of Abraham. Marianna Klar investigates the difference in quality and quantity between the divine Qur'an conversations with David and with Solomon.

Her work illuminates the differences and implications of these human-divine communications. The concept of the divine also takes different forms. George Aichele highlights the four depictions of Jesus in the Gospels.

The sacred narratives depict the human condition. This suggests the Deuteronomimic wisdom, "They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed, but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you" (Deut 16:17). The stories can be simple or complicated, depending on what the reader brings to them.

Part III. According to the *Topographies: Landscape and Body* introductory comments of Jonathan Bordo, the desert landscape represents a holy surface, one that witnesses the interaction between the human and the divine. This section discusses the parallels between the bodily surface area of the inhabitants of the holy land and the topography of the holy land itself. The human body and skin are treated as holy as are the environment and its landscapes.

The human skin is the literal and metaphorical boundary that guards the individual. Thus the health of the skin plays a central ritual role. The integrity of bodily fluids is controlled by a healthy skin and, by extension, the actions of a healthy body. Any appearance of fluids is met with specific ritual practice to guard the separation, not only between man and women, but also between human and the divine. Fluids associated with life-creating forces, blood and semen, earn ritual regulation in the Levitical holiness codes.

The purity, simplicity, and even smoothness of the desert landscape suggests a boundary between the chaotic forces of death and disorder located in the underworld and the forces of life ordered by the Levitical codes located above ground.

The occurrence of a flood on the surface of the desert topography breaches and thus challenges the orderly containment of the human-divine boundaries. In her article, Christine Dykgraaf compares the mythical flood stories including that of Gilgamesh with the stories of the Tanakh and the Qur'an. She notes how the Qur'an contrasts the flood and the unbelievers to the ark and the righteousness of Noah. Natural occurrences and the landscape contribute important details as figurative depictions of the human success at maintaining a holy environment inside and out.

William McBride discusses the inscription of the covenant and meaning on the body (circumcision) and the heart. Betsy Bauman-Martin takes up the breach of the human and divine separation in the form of the virgin birth of Jesus. In her essay, Bauman-Martin takes the human perspective of Mary and argues that the submissive depiction of this conception has romanticized male aggression in literature and culture (see Geissinger).

Ruth Tsoffar provides an alternative reading of the story of Ruth and Naomi as a response to the trauma of Otherness and its internal ideology. She resituates the narrative within the history of Moab, going back to Genesis, to the story of Lot and the conception of Moab, as the experience of destruction and hunger that continues to inform the reality of Ruth. Ruth's ability to survive is her ability to reverse hunger into plenty and in the large scheme of things to transform tight boundaries of exclusions into the ultimate inclusion of Otherness.

Kecia Ali examines the most personal of topographies, the female body as it is legislated within the lines of the Qur'an. She suggests a Qur'anic reading which advances partnership, gender equality, and ethical sexuality.

Part IV. In her introduction to the section, *Subjectivity*, Ngwarsungu Chiwengo brings more than theory to this collection. Her subjectivity, by her own description, is that of the Congolese, non-Western, Christian reader. While the Abrahamic tradition deals in boundaries, cultural influences on human subjectivity have no such limits.

Fundamental to the practice of the Abrahamic tradition is a demand for religious exclusivity, but the reality can be quite different. Viviana Balsera attests to the hybridization or deep intersections of Christian and indigenous mezzo-American cultural and religious practices. Balsera writes that a 20th century shaman living in Huatla, Oaxaca, Mexico, interwove Christian theology and indigenous practices that include fortune telling, astrology, and spells.

J'annine Jobling and Alan Roughley discuss how authority and power are transmitted and utilized by Queen Esther, a complicated, empowered figure and one that the patriarchal text seeks to silence and some feminist readings seek to dismiss (see Chiwengo).

In practice, any institutionalized entity such as a religious one, typically requires unquestioning faith. Critical thinking is frowned on. The doubter becomes the leper. Yet, these sacred texts supply ample room for the full spectrum of emotional encounters with the divine presence. Kathleen Lundeen shows the emotional richness of Job's story with its

acknowledgement of the important role played by doubt in any spiritual journey. Roberta Sabbath explores both the unexpected Abrahamic laugh in the face of divine promise and the equally unexpected advocacy in the face of divine wrath (see Schwartz). The implicit human compassion towards Sodom and Gomorrah shown by Abraham's advocacy serves as a corrective to divine wrath and punishment.

The interaction between sacred stories and popular culture has a rich history, unbridled by institutional constraints. Robert Seesengood and Jennifer Koosed show how post-Civil War Missouri popular culture associated Jesse James with the victimization of Jesus. Gottfried Hagen argues that a mythology involving the prophet Muhammad began to spring up shortly after the death of the prophet. In spite of the institutionalized Islamic attempts to resist the production of narratives, stating that the extra-Qur'anic stories were built for amusement, Hagen argues that these stories of the prophet Muhammad supplement and enrich the Qur'an.

Part V. *Gift and Sacrifice* dominated social relations in the earliest civilizations, according to Andrew Wernick's introduction. Using the work of Marcel Mauss on the exchange value of gift, counter-gift, and sacrifice, Wernick points to numerous accounts in the sacred texts that provide benchmarks for the Abrahamic tradition. Particularly in ancient cultures, the gift, counter-gift, and sacrifice rituals permeated social intercourse, setting a value to the relationship between the giver and the recipient. The object given or sacrificed reflected that value. In religious rituals, such logic could require giving up the most valued thing: the first born, the prized wife, the best warriors, a cherished companion.

The Akedah, or sacrifice of Isaac, is the narrative benchmark of the fundamental shift from human to animal sacrifice. The moment the divine orders the sacrifice of the son be replaced with the ram is a watershed showing the compassion of the God of Abraham. John Ulreich decries a religious practice that requires a father to sacrifice his son and discusses the compassion implicit in the Akedah.

Sacred narrative is largely dedicated to the decisions, actions, desires, and visions of men. The two sacrifices of the son, whether by the earthly father, Abraham, or the heavenly father, God, serve as foundational religious moments while the sacrifices and exchanges of women barely earn narrative mention. Magda Romanska remarks that the sacrifice of Sarah is erased. After the Akedah, Sarah disappears from the text completely. Readers are left to wonder whether the prospect of Isaac's sacrifice killed her.

Continuing a look at the sacrifice of women, Aisha Geissinger suggests that the Qur'an makes a typological connection between Mary and the virgin birth of the Messiah to Miriam, sister of Moses, and her vigilance over Moses. Both women, the one as mother, the other as protector, serve as vehicles of the divine will through their personal sacrifices. Mary in particular undergoes the humiliation of giving birth as an unmarried woman in a censorious patriarchal society. Geissinger breathes air into the character of Mary, pointing to the ways in which some Qur'anic passages present her as a socially marginalized, even seemingly scandalous figure (see Bauman-Martin; also Kimbrel).

If the exception makes the rule regarding the dearth of female portraits, then the story of Achsah, according to Ken Stone, is notable as one of the rare women characters who acts independently, succeeds in commerce and family life, and even arranges for gifts that meet her own high standards (see Jobling/Roughley).

Sacrifice comes in many forms. When each individual counts as an integral entity, the giving up of any part, either physical or emotional, of that integrity must be framed with narrative meaning. This can include either reward for the sacrificed or punishment for the perpetrator. Cautionary messages of the breach of human worth abound in these sacred texts which do not mince words in describing the despicable or the cruel. By recognizing the exchange value of a gift or sacrifice of all human interaction, the Abrahamic texts make each individual count. All human interaction must meet the test of dignity for the individual and honor for the community.

Part VI. In his introductory comments to *Imperialism, Revolution, and Community*, Stephen Moore explains the importance of applying a variety of literary tools to extract meaning from the text and make the works more relevant, serving to build bridges between readers.

Regina Schwartz highlights the importance of all the sacred texts in setting ethical standards designed to instruct citizens in their responsibilities to the community. Her thesis also applies to what the community owes the individual and what each individual owes the other. She discusses the values bequeathed to the Hebrews at Sinai. She expands her conversation of ethical practice and responsibility with the work of philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas and enlists philosopher Alain Badiou's concept of the moment of truth to argue that the Sinai gift of the tablets sets the stage for fidelity to the Abrahamic tradition.

Wendy Belcher comments on sacred text social and political values as she explains the African mythology that describes the conflict between two monarchies, one ruled by King Solomon and one by a virgin Ethiopian queen. The mythical tradition includes the theft of the Ark of the Covenant by the Ethiopian military forces from Solomon's court. The myth denaturalizes the patriarchal social structure of the Abrahamic tradition and invites readings about the role of gender and power (see Jobling/Roughley, Tsoffar, Stone).

Sacred texts also reflect on the freedom of social classes. The work of Boer and Abraham suggests another conflict and reminds the reader of the profound influence of the Muslim world in Europe. Colleen Conway's work on the Pauline letter to Philemon addresses the complicated issue of slavery. She suggests that the Pauline letter brings to light the conflict that occurs when a human being is property. Paul's letter implies, but does not resolve, the conflicting demands of ownership and human rights.

Paul's letters to the Romans inspired Jay Twomey's examination of the political question of the rights of the individual vs. state powers. Twomey compares the polemics of the sermons of 18th century, pre-Revolutionary polemicist preacher Jonathan Edwards with the positions taken by Supreme Court Judge Antonin Scalia. Twomey finds the 18th century preacher a stronger advocate for government accountability than the Supreme Court Judge.

Imperialism, Revolution, and Community addresses the ability of a society to set standards that affect the well-being of all of its citizens. The quality of life of its members, is as much a measure of a society's success as its standing in the outside world. These sacred texts grapple with the charge of balancing the welfare of individual citizens and the necessary powers of the state.

When a text, sacred or otherwise, is unfamiliar, that unknown may invite suspicion, fear, avoidance, and, ultimately ignorance. The charge of this collection is to promote polymorphous readings and to energize a lively dialogue. As readers, we may see ourselves in the portraits of the sacred personages whose hopes and struggles suggest our own journey and our own quest for enlightened humanity.

PART I

POETICS

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Peter Heath

When approaching the subject of the poetics of religious texts, we must first ask: Is such a poetics possible? And if it is, then what exactly is it and is it similar or different from the poetics of other categories of texts? In the last half century, the borders of the domain of poetics have increased so greatly that the first question (whether there is a poetics applicable to religious texts?) may seem superfluous. After all, contemporary scholars currently include in poetics not only the analysis of recognized literary classics but also of films, works of popular culture, or even such sociological or cultural phenomena as fashion and advertisement. Surely one can assume that the incredibly powerful and significant central texts of the major monotheistic traditions—the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'an—would have a clear poetics? After all, the apparent breadth of humans' positive response to these religions over the centuries should demonstrate that they do. Nonetheless, matters that appear self-evident are often those best to question. I would advise initial caution, or at least suggest that we take a moment to understand the complexities involved.

A dictionary definition of poetics is "Literary criticism that deals with the nature, forms and laws of poetry."¹ This is very close to the concept of poetics offered by Aristotle over 2300 years ago.² His view was that as an omnipresent human or social phenomenon, poetry and its sub-categories—such as tragedy, epic, or comedy—could be studied to ascertain their basic nature, forms, and laws. Although he devoted a significant part of his study to identifying and analyzing poetry's key constituents (character, plot, and setting, for example), he ended by defining genres mainly by their constituent natures and psychological or emotional effects. Poetry, in his view, is imitation of certain types of actions, each form of which, if successful, produces an intended emotional reaction among members of the audience. Tragedy, for

¹ *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3d ed. 1992.

² Aristotle, *The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

instance, imitates the actions of noble characters with a unity of plot so that the audience experiences the cathartic emotions of sympathetic fear and pity for the tragic protagonist. Following Aristotle, one might therefore posit that a poetics of religious texts would focus on analysis of the forms of “imitation” (or at least communicative messages) found in religious texts and the emotional or spiritual effects that they thereby produce.

Aristotle attempted to deal with universals, concepts that are shared equally by all human beings. Yet another question arises: Can one assume in regard to religious texts that all different types or genres are equal in their affective intensity? Can one claim that a religious narrative, a psalm, a parable, or a verse are each equally powerful and convincing? Or that they even create the same type of reaction among audiences? In other words, are some poetic forms or techniques more effective than others? Even if one can conclude that this can be the case in regard to one religion, would such a poetic hierarchy hold for all religions? Are there cases where one religion’s extremely powerful narrative appears less powerful, or even falls completely flat, among non-believers or those not culturally familiar with the text? If this is the case, then we are dealing not with universal responses but rather with audience predispositions so strong that they might mitigate the effectiveness of any posited universal theory of poetics. In this situation, creating a universal poetics of religious texts becomes an impossible goal.

There are three potential answers to the question of whether there can be a poetics of religious texts. The first is to say that these texts are of such existential and spiritual import that inquiring into their poetics trivializes them. These texts are of such enormous human significance and spiritual sublimity that they set clear and obvious linguistic standards beyond those that characterize any other work. Religious texts are by their very nature beyond rational analysis. Many exceedingly devoted members of a religion, Muslims who hold the Qur’an to be “inimitable” or fundamentalist Christians or Jews who believe that the Bible is literally God’s word, might adopt this position.

A second, completely contrary position would hold that whatever the source of their inspiration, all texts are social and historical phenomena that are open to analysis by the potentially universal scholarly discipline of poetics. One might designate this viewpoint the Enlightenment position. It is universalist in scope (like Aristotle’s theory), but it also posits a clear separation between religion and the objective search for truth in all areas of scientific or rationalist endeavor. Whatever one’s

private religious beliefs, this position assumes that one brackets them and puts them aside when undertaking scholarly research.

A third stance, which one might term the moralistic position, would argue that the only poetics worth having is that which reinforces the positive moral precepts of religion. Hence, a poetics that includes an analysis of pornography or positively presents aspects of the poetics of “evil” or morally pernicious texts that might lead their readers astray should be automatically condemned and excluded from consideration. This is a view held both by Plato and many modern social conservatives. It is worth noting, however, that this moralistic viewpoint is shared by other ideologies, as is demonstrated by the former Marxist practice of banning “bourgeois” forms of literature proves.

The aesthetic principles and intellectual precepts of each of these three positions could easily differ sufficiently that contrasting theories of poetics result—as in fact they have over the course of time. In reading the articles that follow, therefore, the first thing that a reader should do is to ask which type of poetics the respective author espouses.

Conceptual problems do not end here, however. Even for those who champion an “objective” or “scientific” Enlightenment position must confront the dilemma that their assumptions of what a poetics can or should be may be heavily influenced by their predisposition toward culturally familiar artistic forms. One’s very concept of what a religious text should be like can be culturally dictated. Hence, non-Muslim readers are sometimes perplexed by the Qur’an’s generally non-narrative organization and style, just as non-Jews or non-Christians may be confounded by the Old Testament’s early propensity for extended genealogies. Because these texts have exerted such a profound long-term cultural influence, one’s whole conceptual stance or personal inclination can depend on one’s religious upbringing or background. If poetics is intimately connected with aesthetics, might not aesthetic standards differ depending on one’s cultural familiarity with a particular religious text?

It may be, in fact, that rather than adopt the viewpoint of poetics, one should instead pursue rhetorical analysis. Aristotle, again, defined rhetoric as the art of persuasion. Instead of trying to ascertain the poetics of religious texts—which may be particular to specific groups of adherents rather than equally or universally accessible to all humans—could we not more usefully study the rhetorical methods these texts employ to attract and convince their believers. Pertinent here is the example of Saint Augustine. In his *Confessions* he describes his conversion to Christianity after many years of experimentation among the intellectual

and religious trends of his day.³ Only after conversion, he states, could he then use his expert training in the Classical tradition of rhetoric to convert others. As he states in his classic work, *On Christian Doctrine*, one must first believe in Christianity to be able to understand and interpret correctly the texts of the Bible.⁴ After conversion, one re-reads the very same texts from a completely different point of view. Pre-conversion and post-conversion readings of the same text must differ intrinsically.

The Islamic philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd) offers a useful analysis of how to study religious texts from the perspective of rhetoric. His basic concept is that of “assent,” by which he means indisputable belief.⁵ He understands assent from the point of view of logic, those instances when agreement to basic intellectual principles or syllogisms, once they are articulated, become impossible to dispute for all rational beings. The essential rules of mathematics and such basic logical postulates as “if A is greater than B and B greater than C, then A must be greater than C” are examples of this type of assent.

In regards to religion, Averroes identifies three different categories of rhetorical assent, each of which accords with certain mental dispositions. The most widespread form is imaginative assent based on an appeal to emotions using particular examples or vivid descriptions. A preacher’s dramatic depiction of the details of the fire and brimstone of hell or the wondrous delights of heaven to sway his audience toward belief is one example of this level of discourse. Most people, Averroes asserts, believe in the tenets of religion on the basis of this assent. Second in frequency comes analogical assent based on already existing belief. This is the assent of the theologian (such as Saint Augustine) who, already convinced of the veracity of a religion’s postulates (such as Christ is the Son of God), thereafter uses logical arguments to convince others. The least common type of assent among humans, according to Averroes, is purely rational assent, belief based on the proofs of objective logical demonstration, such as the argument that every thing created must have a creator. This is the most abstract level of assent, but it is

³ See Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated and introduced by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Hammondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1973).

⁴ *On Christian Doctrine*. Translated by D.W. Robertson (Library of the Liberal Arts. New York: MacMillan, 1958).

⁵ Averroes (Ibn Rushd), *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (Gibb Memorial Series. London: Luzac and Company, 1961), especially 58–75.

also the most universal since intellectually oriented individuals from all religions can use it to agree on common principles. Hence, religions may differ regarding to their descriptive particulars (how they portray the conception of the afterlife). Or they can vary in theological principles (polytheism versus monotheism, or the belief in the doctrine of the Trinity). Nevertheless, they may be unified, according to Averroes, in the logical precepts that they share in common. A study of the rhetorical structure of religious texts, therefore, would analyze how these texts use these different rhetorical levels to appeal to and persuade their audiences. Averroes also believes that since people differ in their intrinsic proclivities, any religion that wishes to be universal or broad-based must actively and simultaneously employ all three levels of discourse in order to encompass the needs of all types of individuals.

This brief overview should suggest the complexities of any attempt to develop a poetics of religious texts. The articles that follow highlight different aspects of this endeavor and pursue varied analytical paths. Although none claims to offer a comprehensive or unified poetics of religious texts, they all inherently assume that achieving such a poetics is both possible and desirable. Some interpret poetics from the analytical stance of rhetoric. They explore how a particular religious text is organized so as to convince or influence their audience, either from the viewpoint of use of language (Hoffmann, Mir) or narrative structure (Gwynne, Kimbrel). Other articles use analysis based on literary genres that are not explicitly religious, such as gothic narratives (Ng) or baroque poetry (Sherwood), to elucidate otherwise understudied—or even repressed—aspects of religious texts. Another (Fudge) explores the issue of the influence of later religious tradition on the understanding of scripture and representation of early historical periods interacts with religious preconceptions. Hence, although these articles do not represent every method that can be employed to study the poetics of religious texts, they do offer the reader a variety of approaches that allow for continued analysis.

CONTEMPORARY READINGS OF THE QUR'AN: CRUEL/COMPASSIONATE?

Mehnaz M. Afridi

Introduction

Sacred tropes are more commonly misused than ever to mask and rethink various perspectives of interpreting the world around us. Tropes bring into play within language an act similar to poets who labor at night to counteract the literal uses of common language. However, sacred tropes operate as crucial hermeneutists in masking and bedecking the way in which the voice of the sacred (God or liturgy) differs from literal and transparent reading by the interpreter. The literalist reading overcasts the many embellished moments of sacred tropes. In other words, reading of sacred language can lose its meaning and its rich pregnancy of metaphors, context, illustrations, poetry and metonymic use of the word of God. The use of tropes is often overlooked by the literalist reading since tropes may function as sacred and compassionate vehicles, but, if ignored, they can cause decay. The stagnancy of reading certain words and proclamations literally necessitates a crucial revival from some literal interpretations that can be a cruel and damaging elucidation of the sacred. Although tropes are not singular but multiple in their function, they are powerful like master signifiers of language that can rhetorically persuade to kill. Examples of some tropes that have been interpreted literally within the Qur'an are words such as "infidels," "the people of the one book," "killing," "martyrdom," "allies," "unbelievers," "equality," and "justice."

In the Qur'an, some readers and interpreters of text who have a specific agenda often interpret many verses as literal and other verses with metonymic messages that go unnoticed as insignificant by the unsuspecting reader. It is important to analyze how language, and specifically language in sacred texts, can have multiple meanings and can offer an alternative to literal colloquialism of language. For example, the Qur'an,¹ at the literal level, can vilify a religious group or set a wedge between those groups.

¹ All Qur'anic translations are from Muhammed Asad's version.

For, never will the Jews be pleased with thee, nor yet the Christians, unless thou follow their own creeds. Say: "Behold, God's guidance is the only true guidance. (Qur'an 2:120)

On the other hand, the Qur'an can offer compassionate meanings such as:

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner-unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing-and say: "We believe in that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves. (Qur'an 29:46)

This verse illustrates that trust and belief are to be shared with others; the Qur'an, like any other text, has the linguistic characteristic of the use of tropes that can be both detrimental and favorable to Muslim communities. It is however disconcerting that many Muslims and non-Muslims will lean towards the literal word of the sacred instead of a more complex and rich troping within sacred language. This curious tendency has inspired multiple actions committed by believers as a direct result of those literal understandings; understanding which should have been informed by metaphoric or contextual understandings.² Literalism has the tendency to overpower seemingly indecipherable meanings and create binaries, instead of subtleties, and a convenient, safe haven for those interpreters who resist facing the puzzling and haunting levels that are so much a part of Qur'anic richness.

After 9/11,³ there has been a revitalization of a keen curiosity in Islam, whether these renewed interests lie in the perceptions of Muslims, interpretation of Islam, Islam and the west, and extreme actions committed by Muslims in the name of Islam.⁴ Nonetheless, the renewal has resulted in discussions of how the religious, sacred, secular, and political intersect. Religious tropes and sacred beliefs have been at the forefront of media, academic, and political discussions that have

² Several religious communities have witnessed the tendency that I refer to in using their sacred texts to vilify or kill other religious groups. An example of this is the Crusades who knowingly disengaged from the Gospel's words of peace and salvation unto all others.

³ I emphasize 9/11 because of my timely examples throughout this article however I want to point out that the interpretation of Islam and its image in the West especially the United States has been a problem since the advent of colonialism (please see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

⁴ The interest in Islam has increased to such a height that the California American Islamic Council is distributing Qur'ans for free.

heightened the awareness that the religious is still very much at the vanguard of the Muslim world.⁵ Examples of such intersections have been centered on the sacred and profane in public discourse in the media and newspapers including academic conversations at mosques and secular institutions. Examples include the sacrilegious action of the US Military in Guantanamo Bay where Qur'ans were flushed down the toilet creating world-wide demonstrations and killing of innocent people as well as the murder of the film director Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam, Holland (November 2, 2004). Van Gogh directed a movie portraying naked Muslim women with engraved Qur'anic verses that depicted the oppression of women. Additional horrific examples of the sexual torture and public humiliation that disrespected the sacred prescription of Islamic modesty in the prisons of Abu Gharib, Iraq, evidenced the religious intersection with the political.

Although these brutal acts since 9/11 have created a deeper rift with the religion of Islam and the rest of the non-Muslim world, they have also renewed an interest and even an intrigue in Islam that is important in two ways. The first is the genuineness of sympathetic views of Islam by non-Muslims. The second is a renunciation by the general public of an Islam that is seen as totalizing and violent; an Islam that exercises the sacred as a weapon against the physical safety and well-being of believers and non-believers alike. These opposing reactions have encouraged a plethora of new and reformist interpretations of Islam that are both harmful and beneficial to the images of Muslims. More damaging, though, is the image of Islam that has been further embellished by Islamic extremists who have taken the opportunity to literally seize verses from the Qur'an to suit their own means in a manner that is *reductio absurdum*. The extremists have shown that certain sacred verses (*ayat*) can be justifiably violent and a means to what Gilles Kepel has referred to as a "Martyrdom Operation".⁶ On the other hand, many Muslim scholars have challenged the interpretations of extremists to offer a more humane and compassionate Islam. This debate is ongoing

⁵ Not only is religion at the forefront of the Muslim world but also in the US and Israel. In the context of this article, I will refrain from making these comparisons. Although, it is important to note that religious texts are not only a tool for Muslim interpretation but it is very much part of many conversations in the Jewish and Christian communities.

⁶ Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 71.

in differing schools of thought amongst Islamic scholars, jurists, and even extremists.

The Qur'an, like any other sacred text, holds an infallible meaning for all Muslims and is the eternal word of God who has spoken through the people vis-à-vis words that embody tropes, metaphors, and stories of faith that are above and beyond the unquestionable and absolute word of truth for the faithful.

The duty of each Muslim is to have a dialectical relationship with the Qur'an and to understand the malleability and complexity of the text. How then can one Muslim interpret the sacred for a singular purpose while human beings are fallible. It must be remembered that, when interpreting sacred texts within Islam, no one person has the interpretative power to assign a singular meaning, and no elected Muslim can set down the word of God without a consensus of scholars, muftis, and *Mujtahid*.⁷

Many Americans and Muslims have witnessed a resurgence of sacred religious texts being used as tools for understanding human nature, politics, and as justification for just and unjust actions. The extremist views of the Qur'anic injunctions for violence against others is one that is interpreted on the basis of lazy agendas and authoritarian acts that force the text to mirror what the reader projects upon the text. It is important to analyze some exemplary Qur'anic verses which have been read, on the one hand, as vehicles for acts of terror and mistrust of people of other faiths and, on the other hand, vehicles for peace and tolerance.

The recent books by Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds* (2004) and Tariq Ramadan's *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004) describe two different perspectives on interpreting the Qur'an, and how the Qur'an as a literary, contemporary text can be dangerous and simultaneously healing for many Muslims. Islam recognizes Judaism and Christianity as the people of the one book; however the mistrust of these groups has often relied heavily on Qur'anic rendering of verses. What is it about sacred writing that is seductive to contemporary life? How is sacred text a literary narrative that informs human beings to act in certain ways? What types of Qur'anic verses are being taught without contextual and interpretative reasoning? These are some of the

⁷ *Mujtahid* is a scholar working on scriptural sources in order to infer or extract judgments and legal rulings.

questions that we might ask in order for us to understand how sacred tropes within texts can be embellished, misused and simultaneously be a point of mutual recognition, peace and community building.

There have been many scholastic traditions within Islam that have argued and affirmed the many laws that have been set down as *Shariah* (The way or the path that leads to the spring) or, in other words, how to be and remain Muslims. These schools have changed and evolved through time by different interpretations whether they are conservative, liberal, literal (salafist)⁸ or rationalist reformists. Tariq Ramadan clearly explains the dangers that can result in interpretation and meaning when reading sacred text:

In this area, the text almost never allows itself, alone to lay down a universal principle: it is the human mind that derives both absolute and relative principles, as appropriate, from the Text and from the reality of the context in which it was revealed. In setting out the specificity of these verses, we understand better the importance of remembering that the Revelation was elaborated in time and space, over twenty-three years, in certain context, expressed in pronouncements affected by circumstance, open to evolution, accessible to reason in a historical setting.⁹

Ramadan's point is poignant as he states that the "text almost never allows itself, alone to lay down a universal principle." It is this crucial problem of understanding that one can encounter in many literalist perspectives when a verse is read that becomes a trope for a declaration against Jews, Christians, women, and non-believers in general. This implies that one can literally take verses out of the Qur'an, or out of any sacred text, with a preconceived notion to metaphysically justify one's motivation.

Prominent literalists and tyrants such as Osama Bin Laden and Zawahiri take verses, even snippets, from the Qur'an, and deliver them to the world wide media via video and internet sites. Such public statements include "In the name of Allah the merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to Allah, who has said...slay the infidels wherever ye find them, And seize them, beleaguer them." And "The Mujahadeen have

⁸ The Salafist traditionalists reject the meditation of juridical schools and their scholars when it comes to approaching the sacred texts. Salaf means the companions of the prophet Mohammed of the first three generations after the death of Mohammed. Please see Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) for a thorough explanation of these schools.

⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 208.

kept promise to Allah to cause His religion to triumph.”¹⁰ These statements represent a type of rationale asserting that Allah has asked for a complete retaliation against the infidels, statements which beg the question of who is the “infidel” or *Kafir*, if Jews and Christians (see Qur’an excerpt above) are allotted equal rights and acceptance as Muslims?

An in depth discussion about the word “infidel” is essential in understanding what the Qur’an says about the “unbelievers” versus what we read in the media and extremist transcripts as “infidels.” The Arabic equivalent of infidels is *Kafir* and for unbelievers, *Kharu mun-minin*. These terms appear predominantly in the Meccan¹¹ verses and refer to people outside the Abrahamic tradition. Some examples from the Qur’an are important to mention in re-thinking the verses in the many transcripts of extremists who mediate these verses for their own agendas and goals. One of the most repeated verses by Muslims and non-Muslims is the very idea that Jews and Christians cannot be fully trusted or taken as allies or protectors.

O You who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and Christians for your allies; they are but allies of one another—and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes verily, one of them; behold, God does not guide such evildoers.¹²

This verse can be literally read as Muslims are not to trust Jews or Christians as allies even though they have been given revelations by the same god. The literalist perspective would immediately take these verses out of context to justify political actions against non-Muslims such as: retaliation for the deaths in Bosnia and Palestine.¹³ However, the intellectual strength lies in trying to decipher this very disturbing verse for most Muslims. Is God trying to warn Muslims? Should the Muslim reader scorn Jews or Christians? Alternatively, should s/he try to read the verses as ones that are addressing political factions at

¹⁰ Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 127.

¹¹ Mecca and Medina were the two cities where Prophet Mohammed received his revelations; contextually one can see that he was different in different places and situations in these two cities. In Mecca, the Quraysh tribe and other communities oppressed the Muslims, and he finally went into exile to Medina where he could be more open and preach (*dawa*) and invite people to embrace Islam.

¹² Qur’an 5:51.

¹³ Bosnia and Palestine appear in many extremists’ transcripts that encourage violence against Jews and Christians due to the dispossession of land and massacre of citizens in both cases.

the time of Muhammad who were indeed denying Muslim rights and Muhammad as a true prophet of a new revelation? Furthermore, the word *kafir* has often been misunderstood. It is a word that explains the one who is “a denier with a veiled heart” and this refers to the person who is longing for the transcendent or belief in God. Kafir is also one who denies the existence of many important stories and figures in the Qur'an such as Satan, Adam, and Moses. If one applies the word to Jews and Christians in this context or even the idea that they will not be allies, it is only in reference to accepting Mohammed as the last prophet and the Qur'an. Naturally, neither Jews nor Christians have accepted either but in the same text (Qur'an) they are still very much equally capable and deserving of rewards from God as one can read in the Qur'an concerning the literal redemption and acceptance that awaits Jews, Christians, and Sabeans:

VERILY, those who have attained to faith (in this divine write), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—all who believe in God and the last day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their sustainer and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve (Qur'an 2:62).

The contradictory yet complex nature of sacred texts that utilize literalism in ignoring metonymic or metaphorical devices in language to move en masse millions of extremists is one of the deeper problems within Islam today. The many Muslims who are convinced that, because we human beings have accepted sacred texts in embellished language, we can eventually have a truth that might disavow other truths and lose the meaning of Islam altogether. Tariq Ramadan has acutely written on the meaning of the word Islam that may also be taken in two different interpretations:

We know that in the Qur'an the word Islam has two meanings. The first is universal and generic: all the elements... are in submission to God but they respect the order of creation: in the same sense, all the revelations and prophets came with a message of the oneness of God and need to “submit oneself” to Him... The words *aslim* and *aslamtu* come from Islam in the sense of recognition of the one God and acceptance of the obedience to him. The second meaning of the word Islam is the religion whose text is the Qur'an and whose prophet is Mohammed.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ramadan, *Western Minds and the Future of Islam*, 206.

What Ramadan points out here is that the second meaning is the one that most literalists are using to justify the fractions with other faiths. Rather than justifying discord, they should recognize that other faiths are also practicing submission to God. They should honor respective traditions, especially in pronouncements about Jews and Christians, throughout the Qur'an, and about the acceptance of Moses and Jesus. As the Qur'an says:

Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God, you all must return: and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ (Qur'an 5:45).

The example here illustrates that Islam addresses the diversity of all peoples, Muslims and non-Muslims in an acceptance of one another instead it is essentially the way of life that holds any meaning. The trope of the "one single community" or *Ummah* is one that holds multiple meanings throughout Islam's time, the first that addresses all people living under the rule of Mohammed as a single community and today it is restricted to the *Ummah* of all Muslims across the world. One can interpret historically that the *Ummah* once included those who believed in the one god and were agreeable to the laws of the prophet's community or perhaps that the *Ummah* includes all people as one single community of god as we read so often and in Surah 2:2 in the Qur'an: "This Divine Writ—let there be no doubt about it—is (meant to be) a guidance for all the God-Conscious." As Ramadan points out: "It is a matter first of not deluding oneself that the other "represents," for example, the whole of Hinduism, the whole of Buddhism, the whole of Jainism, the whole of Christianity, or the whole of Islam, and second of knowing what links and types of relations our partners have with their coreligionist."¹⁵ Ramadan is referring to how Muslims need to be conscious of the acceptance of a higher power or the meaning of Islam that teaches that the faithful are the people who submit to the power of God.

In Gilles Kepel's *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, one finds an interesting and accurate analysis of how extremists become

¹⁵ Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, 209.

imbued in the blinding force of literalism and a logic that creates a language that is dogmatic towards the non-Muslim and the believers. In interviews and Al-Jazeera videos and transcripts Osama Bin Laden was asked by an interviewer if he agreed with the concept of a clash of civilizations. He received this reply:

Absolutely. The (holy) book states it clearly. Jews and Americans invented the myth of peace on earth. That's a fairy tale. All they do is chloroform Muslims while leading them to the slaughterhouse. And the massacre continues. If we defend ourselves, they call us terrorists. The prophet said: "The Hour will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them," when a Jew hides behind a rock or a tree, it will say: "O Muslim, O servant of Allah! There is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!" Those who claim that there will be lasting peace between the Jews and us are unbelievers because they disagree with the (holy) Book and its contents.¹⁶

Bin Laden's horrifying response reveals the extremist's literal mind that justifies the killing of Jews in a particular incident in the Hadees (life and stories of Mohammed), which Bin Laden claims as the holy text (Qur'an). In this instance, many Muslims or readers of text can only reproach Bin Laden for taking a horrific story from the Hadees out of context—a story that is essentially not the word of God but a witness account of Mohammed's struggles during the Meccan period. For example, historically Mohammed had to fight not only Meccans but also the Jewish tribes in the area and the Christian tribes in Syria who planned an offensive against him in alliance with the Jews. Yet, this did not make the prophet denounce the people of the one book. Muslims were forced to defend themselves, but they were not fighting a "holy war" against the religion of others. The most common use of literal trends within extremists Muslim groups is how certain verses on "jihad" (holy war in the context of the extremists) have been interpreted and put into terrorizing practice. In this strict and final definition of Jihad or to make killing seem like a duty for all Muslims and terrorism a tool for all Muslims utilizing the sacred text is a glaring problem in the Muslim world today. His justification for his use of Jihad is to revenge the Israelis and Americans for colonization and dispossession of land. In the Qur'an, one can read Bin Laden's literal interpretation in the following manner:

¹⁶ Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, 204.

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression—for verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away—for oppression is even worse than killing.¹⁷

In reading this verse, one might ask whether it has some contradictory meanings. Can Bin Laden take from this a literal killing of the “other” in which the use of the word “them” is misleading, who is the “them”? Is it the Jews? Perhaps—the armies that attacked Mohammed or any other person with a different belief? If looked at closely, one finds that this verse has many metaphoric and metonymic meanings that include the voice of Islam as just and equal in political affairs. “To fight in God's cause” is to struggle and remain in the path of the one God or if “God does not love aggressors” does God give the right to “slay them” and become an aggressor? This command to turn out the enemy just as they turned out Muslims is the reason that one might imagine these verses revealed within the context of the conquest of Mecca. What we experience in Bin Laden's reading is a literal commandment that can be justified to avenge deaths in Palestine and Bosnia, but this for him includes revenge against the Jews as read in his interview about 9/11.¹⁸ Although the Qur'an is timeless, the context and mysterious time line and tropes are left up to the reader and his/her interpretation. In reading sacred texts, the excursion must be whole and with God's command, one is responsible to take the story of Mohammed and the Qur'an as the guide for being Muslim but not an active guide that can be used for any present cause against any political or oppressive regimes. A leader of Al-Qaeda in an interview gives an example of the literalist reading where he states:

In my view, if an enemy occupies a Muslim territory and uses common people as human shields, then it is permitted to attack that enemy. For instance, if bandits barge into a home and hold a child hostage, then the child's father can attack the bandits and in that attack even, the child may get hurt. America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal... The September 11 attacks were not targeted at women and

¹⁷ Qur'an 2:190.

¹⁸ Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, 247.

children. The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power.¹⁹

If this leader does not want to target women and children, then he has assumed that the women and children are somehow separated from the lives of men or were not in the midst of the attacks. This logic or revengeful line of rationalism is the danger that we are faced with everyday. For example, why is it that the extremists do not read the Qur'an contextually or justly where one finds direct verses about Moses and the time of the Pharaoh in the Qur'an where it states:

Go forth, (then,) thou and thy brother, with My messages, and never tire of remembering me: go forth, both of you, unto Pharaoh: for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak to him in a mild manner, so that he might bethink himself or (at least) be filled with apprehension.²⁰

There are also verses that condemn the actions of extremists who would rather seek revenge, suicide, and murder than forgiveness. There are those who take to heart Qur'an 4:29 "And do not kill yourselves. God is most merciful to you." The trope of forgiveness echoes favorably in the Qur'an and the meaning of justice resonate with the manner in which the Shariah and jurists use the Qur'an as the cornerstone of understanding the metonymic messages of the Qur'an. For example:

And pay heed unto God and the Apostle, so that you might be graced with mercy. And vie with one another to attain to your sustainer's forgiveness and to a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, which has been readied for the God-conscious who spend (in His way) in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and hold in cheek their anger, and pardon their fellow-men because God loves the doers of Good.²¹

In understanding sacred text and literal meanings of the messages of God, one can read from many perspectives but with a conscientious awareness of ethical behavior towards all humanity. Unfortunately the rise of many Muslim extremists who are skilled at persuading through the logic of political sacred dictums in the Qur'an have disregarded this. The abhorrence that extremists hold for other people is one of the grimmest dilemmas in the Muslim world. Muslims ought to have trepidation about this type of superficial gauzing of language and decipher new traditions of reading the Qur'an. Interpretations with intellectual curiosity and complexity are an inevitability that the masses within the Muslim world require, that has been lost or even more importantly been

¹⁹ Ibid., 124–125.

²⁰ Qur'an 20:42.

²¹ Qur'an 3:132–134.

dispossessed throughout time. Many Muslims live in the literal trenches of economy, colonial memories, wars, and a desperation that is literally much more alive than the deeper commitment of textual analysis of tropes or texts. More importantly, it is important to probe into why human beings (especially Muslims) are more eager to believe in literal words and less persuaded by the sacred tropes that lie waiting in the dark to be discovered?

If the extremists that rally in the midst of many Muslims are being heard and unethical actions are carried out against both believers and non-believers in the name of Islam or revenge than, the problem of religion lies not in its message but in the followers of religion. Tropes that are read as literal messages of any religion can create a whole religion as cruel or compassionate because the danger lies in human interpretations, agendas, and the fight to be the sole bearer of the truth which in all religions is seen as egotistical and unjust. To take murder and revenge into one's own hands and as a mission in life is to disavow all of Islam's teachings about justice and judgment that is only in the hands of God according to Islamic teaching. However, the literal sacred verses and lack of renunciation, forgiveness, and understanding of all faiths has led to proclamations that:

According to Bin Laden's point of view, the slaughter of innocents is not terrorism. It is merely a minor reparation for the countless crimes and murders committed against Islam and Muslims since the end of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire in 1923. 'What the United States is tasting today is nothing compared to what we have tasted for decades. Our Ummah has known this humiliation and contempt for eighty years. Its sons are killed, its blood is spilled, its holy sites are attacked, and it is not governed according to Allah's command. Despite this, no one cares.²²

Finally, the danger of literalist perspectives within Islam is a problem that requires meticulous and active attention in reviewing the many sacred histories and tropes that lie naked in wait for an interpreter to dress them in fashions that may offend or extend an invitation to understand Islam. Interpreting sacred tropes in text maybe the way in which interpreters can hermeneutically discover meanings in a more dialectical relationship with the text (God).

²² Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, 125–126.

IF THE WORDS BE WELL UNDERSTOOD:
CANTICLES AND THE PROBLEMATIC OF
SPIRITUAL METAPHOR

Jessie Cheney

Upon first reading the Song of Songs, one might not immediately conceive of this book as a holy text. Full of vivid erotic imagery, it contains no obvious or direct references to God or to religious subjects; indeed, one might agree with contemporary biblical critic Robert Alter that its “celebration of passion and its pleasures makes it the most consistently secular of all biblical texts.”¹ But seventeenth-century Puritan readers considered the Song of Songs one of the holiest of books, convinced, as they were, that the love poem at its center was intended to represent the “chiefest matter:” the spiritual romance between God and the human soul. Far from being disturbed, as some might expect them to be, by the sensual language and often quite direct sexual imagery the text features, Puritan commentators praised its “exquisite and amiable Resemblances, taken from the richest Jewels, the sweetest Spices, Gardens, Orchards, Vineyards, Winecellars, and the chiefest beauties of all the workes of God and Man.”² These writers take a deep aesthetic pleasure in explicating the images and are quick to correct those who would restrict access to this text. The influential minister Richard Sibbes, for example, noted with disapproval that “the Jewes took, and doe take great scandall at it, and therefore would not have any to read it, till they should come (at least) to the age of thirty years, lest they should be tempted to wantonnesse and foule incontinence,” ridiculing this attitude as an attempt to be “wiser then God himself.”³ In fact, minister John

¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

² John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition Of the whole book of Canticles or, Song of Solomon, Lively Describing the Estate of the Church in all the Ages thereof, both Jewish and Christian, to this day* (London, 1642).

³ Richard Sibbes, *Bowels Opened: or A Discovery of the Near and Dear Love, Union and Communion Betwixt Christ and the Church...Delivered in divers Sermons on the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Chapters of the Canticles* (London, 1648). This tradition about the Jewish prohibition governing the reading of the Song of Songs is the subject of much discussion. Modern scholars doubt its authenticity, but in this case, it is a useful index to the Puritan attitude toward the text.

Cotton argues, far from being dangerous for younger readers, the text of the Song of Songs is particularly appropriate for them, “for what age (is) fitter for songs than cheerful youth?”

Such tolerance and aesthetic sensibility might seem surprising, especially as the Puritans have long endured a reputation for sexual repression and an anxiety about images.⁴ One must keep in mind, however, that this tolerance depends on the assumption, universally held by the Puritan commentators, that the text was to be read metaphorically. So certain are they that no other reading is possible that they take the text’s powerfully erotic imagery as evidence that something holy must be concealed beneath its surface. As Sibbes explains,

other books of Solomon lie more open and obvious to the understanding, but as none entered the Holy of Holies but the High Priest, so none can enter into the mysteries of the Song of Songs but such as have more near communion with Christ.

Only the most holy of texts, Sibbes reasons, could occupy itself so thoroughly with seemingly earthly matters. He therefore assumes, as do other commentators, that the decidedly sensual language of the text intended as a kind of test of its readers’ spiritual sensitivity.

This idea of concealment as proof of superiority was quite a popular one among seventeenth-century commentators; Cotton, for example, claims that the “darkness” or obscurity of the text’s spiritual meaning compels “a more studious reading and meditating of this Book, as of a most excellent portion of holy Writ.” Thomas Brightman makes a telling comparison: if knowledge that “stands before the doore, and offereth itself freely to every one” is “exceedingly delightful and pleasant,” how much more “delicious then is that which thou hast layd up in the inward treasuries, shut up with so many lockes and bolts?”⁵ Not only does Brightman argue that hidden knowledge indicates greater

⁴ This reputation has, of course, been challenged by many scholars, although to a certain extent, it still exists in the popular imagination. Most influentially, it was challenged by Edmund Morgan, whose almost thoroughly positive portrait of Puritan sexual attitudes has been complicated, more recently, by such works as Freedman and D’Emilio’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* and Richard Godbeer’s *The Sexual Revolution in Early America*. What I want to demonstrate here, however, is that what appears to be an anxiety about sexuality is more properly described as a complex concern about language and representation.

⁵ Brightman, *A Commentary on the Canticles or the Song of Salomon* (London, 1644).

value, but he does so with reference to an image that clearly echoes a central trope in the original text.⁶

Of course, metaphorical readings of the Song of Songs are not unique to the Puritans of the seventeenth century; one can trace them far back into both Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions.⁷ What is unusual about these commentaries is the extent to which they establish a systematic theoretical approach to the problem of metaphor. Even as they defend the use of metaphors, particularly sexual and marital metaphors, for spiritual purposes, they raise questions about their use. In what follows, I will examine several of these commentaries in depth in order to explore the peculiar relationship between sexuality, metaphor and spirituality that they establish. In doing so, I will demonstrate the ways in which the act of interpreting the text calls into question the relation between figurative expression and the material world, both for religious and secular readers.

Sibbes offers the following comprehensive explanation for why the text's divine Author has chosen to represent such a highly important subject as "the union that we have with Christ" by means of such an earthly metaphor:

The Holy Ghost is pleased here to condescend to our infirmities, that we might help ourselves, in our spiritual estate, by our bodily; hee speaketh here of heavenly things after an earthly manner, and in a comfortable mystery. And that wee might the better understand what this union is, hee condescends to our weak capacities, that we might see *that* in a glasse of resemblance which we (through our corruptions) cannot discern in our own nature.

Our human "infirmities," Sibbes explains, make it difficult for us to grasp spiritual truths in their pure and unvarnished form, so the vivid nature of the images and their subject matter are offered to help us improve our understanding; in effect, to reach the spirit *through* the body.

In this passage, Sibbes offers a theory of metaphor that embraces sexuality and the things of the body as part of an essential spiritual process—an attitude reflected in the comment he makes elsewhere that the text uses "the sweetest passage of our life (marriage) and the most

⁶ Interestingly, Brightman chooses to work from an image that itself contains a thinly veiled sexual metaphor—the image of the woman as walled garden.

⁷ See Ann Matter's *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) for an overview of one of these traditions.

delightful affection (love)” to “carry up the soul to things of a heavenly nature.” While he suggests that one may transcend the body in order to reach the spirit, he also implies that human relationships and the things of the body have an importance of their own. Sibbes’ use of the phrase “comfortable mystery” offers a further hint about his meaning here, for although it is undoubtedly *spiritual* comfort that is intended, the term “comfortable” also carries with it the implication of comfort provided by familiar associations and surroundings. Thus, the paradox implied by the phrase “comfortable mystery,” that is, both familiar and strange, offers a perfect representation of the relationship between spirit and body Sibbes envisions. Our comfort with something both enticing and appealingly familiar (marital sexuality) can be translated into spiritual comfort, if only we are able to properly apply ourselves to the reading of the text.

But Sibbes’ attitude toward sexuality and the body is somewhat more ambivalent than this passage alone would suggest. Elsewhere, in a quite different tone, he marvels at the fact that

the Holy Spirit hath chosen this way in this Song, by elevating and raising our affections and love, to take it off from other things, so that it might run in its right channell. It is pity that a sweet stream should not rather run into a garden, then into a puddle. What a shame it is that man having in him such excellent affections, as love, joy, delight, should cleave to dirty base things that are worse than himself, so becoming debased like them?

While Sibbes also claims that only those who are of “corrupt heart” will find offense here because “to the pure all things are pure,” there is a note of disdain about these “dirty base things” that seems at odds with his other comments. Of course, it may be that in one case Sibbes refers to married love and in the other, he warns against illicit sexual relationships, but he does not make this distinction in any clear way. In any case, we must believe that both passages are prompted by the imagery of the Song of Songs, which is explicitly sexual in nature, and thus must reflect both “love, joy and delight” and “dirty base things.” As such, the commentary implies a complex attitude toward sexuality and sexual metaphor. Having once claimed that he is certain that one *can* reach the spirit through the body, Sibbes immediately problematizes his own conclusion, raising the possibility that we will be unable to transcend the things of the body and be forever mired in that which is “base.” This tension raises some interesting questions about the status of sexuality and the body for Sibbes. Does he see physical nature as

merely a convenient stand-in for the spiritual, for those who are not pure enough to experience spirituality itself? Or does he mean that if the reader were pure enough, he or she would understand sex in a different way—"to the pure all things are pure?" Also, is his aim to have the two realms—that of the body and that of the spirit—coexist, as the first passage suggest? Or are we meant to eventually transcend the things of the body altogether, as the second passage indicates, with its stark contrast between "garden" and "puddle," excellence and "dirty base things?"

Sibbes' ambivalence is, in a sense, characteristic of Puritan writers of the period, who tend to treat the subjects of marriage and sexuality with mixed emotions. On the one hand, these writers defended the institution of marriage in opposition to Catholic celibacy, arguing that a good, loving marriage was an essential building block of a stable society. But they also feared that excessive love for a spouse could interfere with one's obligations to the community, or even with one's spiritual aspirations, and thus have a destabilizing effect: a situation that is often referred to as the danger of choosing the creature over the creator.

A related fear seems to have plagued the writers of the Song of Songs commentaries, whose praise of the text's erotic metaphors and confidence about their correct interpretation was tainted with anxiety about the meaning and effect of such metaphors on the reader. This is especially evident in the work of John Cotton, who includes, like Sibbes, a theoretical consideration of the problem of metaphor in his commentary, entitled *A Brief Exposition Of the whole booke of Canticles*. Cotton, as I have noted above, praises the literary qualities of the text and its superior "resemblances" or metaphorical comparisons. But Cotton's praise is qualified by a similarly complex theory of how these images are to be handled by the reader, as he explains that

the amorousnesse of the dittie will not stirre up wantonnesse in any age, if the words be well understood:⁸ but rather, by inflaming with heavenly love, will draw out, and burne up all earthly and carnall lust; and, even as fire in the hand is drawne out by holding it to a stronger fire, or as the light and heat of the Sunne extinguisheth a kitchin fire; so doth heavenly love to Christ extinguish base kitchin lusts.

⁸ Cotton is referring to the age of the reader here, but the historical emphasis of the first two editions of the *Exposition* suggests that there may also be a reference to ages in church history.

The meaning here is enigmatic at best. Although Cotton, as I have noted elsewhere, takes issue with those who fear that the text may provoke “wantonnesse” in the vulnerable younger reader, his almost tautological claim that “wanton” reading will not occur if “the words be well understood” provides little explanation of how we are to ensure that this proper mode of reading will take place. The metaphor Cotton employs leads only to further complications. Certainly, we may understand that Cotton wishes us to accept that a greater spiritual passion may overwhelm “base kitchin lusts,” but claiming that a greater fire will extinguish the lesser does little to illuminate this notion. And Cotton’s disapproving references to “wantonnesse” and “base kitchin lusts,” even in this context, seem to belie the pleasure he takes, and by extension expects us to take in the text’s sensually appealing “resemblances.”

Cotton, like Sibbes, puts his faith in the reader, whom he trusts to use these metaphors properly: as the basis for spiritual transcendence. But what type of readers do these commentators expect will be *able* to make the proper transformation? If, as Sibbes suggests, only those who have “more near communion with Christ,” that is, have already received grace, can be expected to understand the text in the proper spirit, then why would they require its assistance in the first place? Conversely, if they are not, how can we be certain that they will read the text correctly and thus avoid any “wantonnesse” its images might provoke? Those for whom “the words (would) be well understood,” it would seem, are not necessarily those whose human “infirmities” require the assistance of metaphor.

Beneath both these writers’ confident assertions about the holiness of the text and the ability of its words to repel “wanton” reading lie a deep anxiety about the use and interpretation of sexual and marital metaphors. They are not so much troubled about sexuality itself as they are concerned about the possibility that the metaphors may not achieve their intended purposes. If we follow Cotton’s and Sibbes’ theories to their logical conclusions, we must accept that the reader who fails to make the proper translation from body to spirit (and thus is tempted into “wantonnesse”) would be providing evidence that the metaphor itself is fallible, vulnerable to misreading. Such evidence of the vulnerability of metaphors to “wrong,” that is, literal reading, would be especially damaging to a system that depends on metaphor as a means toward spiritual inspiration.

In a wider sense, the question can be understood as follows: whether we as readers can actually bridge the gap between the material and

spiritual worlds, and whether images of things human, sensual and familiar can aid us in our quest for spiritual enlightenment. The poetry of the book of Canticles, so earthy in its tone, highlights the issue in a particularly pointed way. Robert Alter, in his *Art of Biblical Poetry* demonstrates how the grammar of the original text focuses our attention on metaphorical language with what he refers to as “the poetics of flaunted figuration.” That is, the reader is constantly made aware of the “full and free play” of imagery, of the images themselves, even of their artificiality, blurring the line between metaphor and referent.

It is this aspect of the text, I would argue, that made it both especially compelling and especially problematic for the Puritan commentators. Metaphor was an extremely important element of their rhetorical theory,⁹ but at the same time, it presented certain problems that we see reflected in the commentaries. The act of engagement with a text that highlights the issue of artifice in such a dramatic fashion would have offered the commentators a special opportunity to confront some of these essential aesthetic as well as spiritual questions.

The explication of the Song of Songs’ powerfully sensual imagery allowed the Puritan commentators to revel in the art of figurative language, often participating in it themselves by means of embroidering on the metaphors, as we have seen, while still striving to control and understand them properly. It is this vital tension that animates the writers of these commentaries and comes closest, in the end, to helping us to understand their complex attitude toward both sexuality and figurative language—one that involves a delicate balance between desire and control.

Their reading of the text keeps the faithful reader poised in the middle of two extremes, forced to contemplate the paradox of how the physical and the spiritual, the literal and the metaphorical, the earthly and the divine can coexist.

⁹ On metaphor and Puritan rhetorical theory, see, for example, Debora Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), Teresa Toulouse, *The Art of Prophesying: New England Sermons and the Shaping of Belief* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), and Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Voices in the Wilderness: Public Discourse and the Paradox of Puritan Rhetoric* (University of Alabama Press, 1999).

QUR'AN, CANON, AND LITERATURE

Bruce Fudge

One of the most profound differences between study of the Bible and the Qur'an is that the literary appreciation of the former has not always been strong. Current approaches to the Bible as literature are the exception and not the norm in centuries of scriptural scholarship. "If some today would discount the Bible's religious claim but allow it to remain as a great literary monument, the English intelligentsia of the 1750s was far more likely to think that religious value was all it had."¹ The linguistic and rhetorical qualities of the Islamic revelation, though, are a matter of dogma among Muslims, as the Qur'an is held to be a literary achievement of which mortals are incapable.

This contrast is meant to introduce the two themes of this article. First, despite the many shared qualities of the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths, what holds true for the Bible may well not apply to the Qur'an, and one must be wary of conclusions reached by analogy. Second, and more allusively, the respective attitudes to which I refer above are the property not of the texts themselves, but of the communities that hold them to be culturally or religiously relevant. That is, the qualities (literary, dogmatic) of a scripture, in so far as a consensus exists on such matters, is determined less by the text itself than by communities of believers (or heirs to those believers who may not share the theology of their ancestors but nonetheless regards the scripture as culturally important in a manner not generally granted to other texts).

In what follows I shall address the matter of qur'anic authority, but I do not intend to deal with legal or theological authority, as qur'anic authority is conventionally conceived. Rather, I am concerned with scriptural influence/authority as it is manifested in literature, which is of course in part a function of the scripture's own literary qualities. Scriptural references may take a myriad of forms, each probably requiring its own elucidation; I will here provide some general remarks concerning both the reading of scripture *as* literature and scripture *in*

¹ Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 208.

(other genres of) literature, and briefly address briefly the examples of two post-colonial, European novels: Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine* (1991) and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

If we are to examine the Hebrew Bible, New Testament or Qur'an for their literary merits, as literature, then one must be clear about one's method and object of investigation. One cannot help but feel that these three texts were chosen not merely out of an interest in literature, but because of their religious status, past or present. The logical option is to take them as literary texts and treat them as such, with no connection to religious community or tradition beyond basic historical or philological necessity. What should not be assumed is that such study is of any relevance to an understanding of Judaism, Christianity or Islam.²

The methodological issue is most clear in the distinction between scripture and revelation. We have, from the lengthy footnote of an Arabist and philologist, the following definitions:

scripture—as canonical discourse possessed, cognized, revered, dealt with, and augmented by and within a historically established and evolving religious community—and *revelation*—as, materially, more or less the same discourse *prior* to its canonization and “scripturalization,” at the point of its production and issuance as a genre of verbal communication or expression which would *perhaps* have been addressed to the formation, delineation, or regulation of such a religious community before or during its embryonic stages.³

It is not difficult to find studies in which these categories are disregarded or, more likely, unrecognized, in which there is a stated goal to look at

² A good example is Norman O. Brown, “The Apocalypse of Islam,” in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley, 1991), 155–170 [reprinted in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 24 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 355–380]. This brilliant article is a commentary on *Sūra* 18 of the Qur'an, but since it has very little to do with how Muslims have treated or understood the *Sūra* it remains a study of literary form and personal interpretation. It has nothing to do with the religion of Islam. By contrast, the essays in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), demonstrate an awareness of the issue (see especially Kermode, “Canon,” 600–610), and are of greater interest and use to the student of religion.

³ Michael Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The *Sūra* of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur'anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 206 n. 2.

the Qur'an "in its own right,"⁴ or "at its face value as an intended, whole expression of the tradition."⁵ Such studies, I think, need to be treated with caution, or at least the question needs to be asked, What exactly is being studied here? When looking at the meanings or the literary structure of the Qur'an, is one undertaking a literary or theological study? And what exactly does the author bring to bear on the Qur'an? Keeping in mind that we are interested in these texts because they are works of a religious tradition with a different status from other classics, does a literary study carry any religious significance?

It is of course possible to treat the text as revelation, but that requires a degree of methodological discipline and rigor. The scholar cited above, Michael Zwettler, writes that his "primary interest, as an Arabist, Islami[ci]st, philologist, and literary critic, is to arrive at an interpretation of the [qur'anic passage] and of the kind of world it enunciates which might approximate that of its initial hearers—believers, unbelievers, and those who may have been religiously indifferent but verbally sensitive and culturally aware."⁶ This degree of precision is rare.

For the historian of religion, whose object of study is the scripture, that is, the text of revelation *within* the community, the idea of scripture as literature is nonetheless a rich one. In the qur'anic case, we find for instance that Arabic literary theory ostensibly centers on the rhetorical supremacy of the Qur'an, and this emphasis shaped the development of the field. For example, figurative language was the subject of great dispute in matters of exegesis and theology, and Arabic theory of metaphor and other figures is highly sophisticated. Narrative, on the other hand, was largely neglected by pre-modern critics, although the sources themselves are ripe for analysis, especially the tales of the pre-Islamic prophets (the genre known in Arabic as *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*), many of which consist of narrative expansions of qur'anic verses. Extremely widespread is the use of qur'anic citations or allusions in poetry and prose.⁷ Any or all of these topics are fruitful fields for the intersection of scripture (religion) and literature. For the present essay I have chosen

⁴ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 30.

⁵ Richard C. Martin, "Structural Analysis and the Qur'an: Newer Approaches to the Study of Islamic Texts," in *Studies in Qur'an and Tafsir*, ed. Alford T. Welch [= *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47.4 (1979)], 668, cited in Zwettler, 206 n. 2.

⁶ Zwettler, 206 n. 2.

⁷ See Wadad al-Qadi and Mustansir Mir, "Literature and Qur'ān," in *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane McAuliffe (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000–2006), s.v.; Bruce Fudge,

the modern novel because it provides an easy point of comparison between the uses of Islamic and Judeo-Christian scriptures, and also because the works in question have, in varying degree and kind, an antagonism towards the sacred narratives and their tropes that brings them into greater relief.

Now, here we must pause to consider what it is about scripture that is distinguished from other cultural references such as history or other forms of literature. This is a broad question, but two points should be made. Zwettler's definition above describes how the community affects its scripture but says nothing about the way scripture influences the believers. At the risk of oversimplification, let us say that scripture exerts authority. Authority is notoriously difficult to describe, but it clearly involves a relationship, between speaker and audience, reader and text, which allows "certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or ... to make audiences act as if this were so."⁸ This authority is both an effect and the capacity for producing that effect, but also, crucially, "the commonly shared opinion that a given actor has the capacity for producing that effect."⁹ Scripture is a kind of discourse that carries or commands this kind of authority or, rather, audiences are willing to grant it that kind of authority. If scriptural authority forces people to play by its rules, then one may not dissociate the scripture from the rules, and this should apply not only to theological tracts and sermons but also to its manifestations in secular milieux. These rules, whether flaunted or respected, are part of the difference between scriptural and other cultural references in literature.¹⁰

Now, where this authority works effectively and unobtrusively, it may often be hard to detect; it may be more fruitful (and more interesting) to see where the authority is threatened or weakened, and that is what we have in these novels of Assia Djebar and Salman Rushdie.¹¹

"Qur'an and Arabic Literature," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Josef Meri (Routledge: London, 2005), s.v.

⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

⁹ Lincoln, 10–11.

¹⁰ This is not to deny that other cultural references can be fraught with meaning or moral significance, or that in some milieux, scriptural references might be so commonplace as to lose such significance.

¹¹ There are a number of other possible candidates who have given fictional or allegorical accounts of episodes from prophetic or early Islamic history: certain of the plays of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *Awlād ḥārati-nā* (1959) ("The Children of our Alley") of Naguib

In the cases of *Loin de Médine* and *The Satanic Verses*, we can look at how, on the thematic level, they interact with or treat the Qur'an or other documents of Muslim salvation history. But the connection to the Qur'an is not direct. To be brief, the "authority" that is in question in these two novels is a kind of identification, a Muslim identity based on the narrative of Islamic origins. By this I mean the story of the Prophet Muhammad, his receiving of the revelations, the formation (oppression and persecution) of the early community, their emigration from Mecca to Medina and their struggle in both belief and worldly matters. The Qur'an itself provides support for all of these, but it is really in the context of the *Sīra*, the life of Muhammad, that these themes are given life, or cohere to form a particular type of world or society.¹² It is these themes, in their entirety, that constitute our authority, our sacred tropes. Through these motifs and this grand narrative, identification with the Islamic community takes shape. In *Loin de Médine* and *The Satanic Verses*, this Islamic community, this supposedly involuntary identity, is at odds with the world outside, and our authors are unwilling to completely accept the terms of the authority relationship.

In Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine* very early Islamic history, that immediately following the death of the Prophet, is supplemented by the stories and speculation concerning the women of the first Muslim community. A good amount of historical research has gone into the book, and it is an obvious attempt to recuperate the feminine, the heroines of Islam, and to legitimize a kind of equality between the sexes that the guardians of Muslim tradition are seen to have largely effaced. Elegantly blending history and imagination, Djebar extracts from the shadows of the Muslim memory a world in which women played crucial roles in the formation of their polity and society, and not merely as uniformly pious believers or good wives and mothers, but with a certain celebration of women's potential roles as warriors or figures of temptation. It is a reading or re-telling that would no doubt meet with disapproval from more traditional quarters, but what is interesting is that Djebar remains respectful of the Islamic religion and the figure of the Prophet

Mahfouz, Driss Chraïbi's *L'homme du livre* (1995), etc. I chose Djebar and Rushdie both for their accessibility and relative intelligibility to the non-specialist reader.

¹² The life of the Prophet Muhammad is known from various sources, but the single most important is the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), which we have in the recension of a slightly later scholar, Ibn Hishām (d. 833 or 838). The biography is available in English translation as *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, reprint Karachi, 1967).

Muhammad, generally stays away from the Qur'an, and leaves God out of her story. The narrative of sacred history remains intact and largely unchallenged—it is in this respect a conservative text.

The same cannot be said for *The Satanic Verses*. Whereas Djébar, seeking accommodation, took the narrative of Muslim history and inserted the “daughters of Ishmael” into the blank spots, Rushdie irreverently takes on the meta-narrative of Muslim history and identity, sending up the life of the Prophet, the Iranian Revolution, and more conservative views of Muslim culture in general. (One might add that British society does not fare so well, either.) Indeed, rather than search for accommodation for his modernism, Rushdie mocks the Islamic tradition at those points where it is weakest, the best known example being the tale of the so-called “satanic verses,” in which the Prophet Muhammad may have temporarily abandoned his uncompromising monotheism by allowing the worship of three female deities in addition to the one true God.¹³

So *Loin de Médine* is a much more conservative work than *The Satanic Verses*, precisely because of Djébar's self-imposed restraints on what she may write regarding the sacred in Islam. *Loin de Médine* celebrates a kind of diversity within a limited ethnic-religious framework, while *The Satanic Verses* cuts to what Rushdie sees (and I do not think he would be alone here) as the heart of the matter, and that is belief (or “faith” a believer would be more likely to say). Rushdie's novel posits a stark tension at the heart of Islam: the necessity to choose between belief and non-belief, and it also upends the somewhat sacred paradigm/narrative of Muslim identity I described earlier. Rushdie takes the themes of belief, oppression, emigration, and community, and applies them to the chaos of the modern world. But in order for this to be effective, those themes and the motifs that illustrate them must carry a resonance, a cultural weight; they must reflect some kind of authority, for they are more than cultural references. They add a (variable) moral or epistemological dimension to the narrative. Although not nearly as audacious as Rushdie, the same may be said of Djébar, for she sets her novel in the same world, with the same characters, precisely

¹³ A clear and concise treatment of the purported incident and subsequent Muslim opinion is that of Shahab Ahmed, “Satanic Verses,” in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane McAuliffe (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000–2006), s.v.

because of their import, their cultural-religious significance, although she studiously avoids the difficult question of belief, and stays within the bounds of piety or orthodoxy.

The furor that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* is well known, and although the causes of that furor can largely be attributed to a variety of social and political circumstances, the conventional, theological reasons for the subject's sensitivity are of interest to us here. There is not space to go into detail, but suffice it to say that the story of the Satanic verses as found in the Arabic historical tradition, present but not necessarily accepted (usually denied), deals with the integrity of the Qur'an as God's revelation. More than that, though, it casts doubt on the integrity and reliability of the Prophet, and while some Muslim modernists might argue the point, the sanctity of the Qur'an is wholly dependent on the Prophet and on those who recorded and transmitted his words and deeds. That is, it is only with the accompanying historical reports and gradually developing doctrine that we know not only the words of the Qur'an, but also that these were the words of God, just as we know something of the exemplary life and deeds of the man who transmitted them. The Qur'an refers to events from the career of Muhammad, but interpretation of these verses is traditionally dependent on the extra-scriptural sources. This complex of Qur'an, history and prophetic biography is itself the "canon," a word which can be synonymous with scripture, but perhaps more appropriate here for a collection of texts/books/reports. This canon is the source of our sacred authority, and it is to the canon, as opposed to the Qur'an alone, that we should turn our literary-minded gaze.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the fact of authority is more important than the content of that authority. One need only look at the impressive variety of dogmata that people have claimed on the basis of Bible or Qur'an (or literature). Scripture or canon is "a transhistorical textual community," in the words of Robert Alter, and, I would add, that is why we are interested in these texts. Alter goes on to say that canon, or at least the biblical canon (and the same holds true for the Islamic) has always been subject to debate and reinterpretation even within the community, despite what its spokespeople may claim at any given time.

Modern writers, then, merely push to the next step this process of extending the range of meanings of the textual community in which they participate when they use the biblical canon...to express vitalistic

pantheism, or an individual fate of hapless victimhood, or a vision of cosmic pitilessness, or a notion of eternal recurrence.¹⁴

How many students of religion or literature would disagree with these assertions? If we give our assent, we are I think forced to acknowledge distinction between revelation and scripture (or revelation and canon) and accordingly to take it into account.

There are two main reasons for insisting on recognition of an Islamic canon as opposed to merely the text of scripture to set alongside the books of the Bible. The first is that there is a modern tendency to concentrate on a single book or text as the locus of authority (that the Protestant and his Bible be the model for the Muslim and his Qur'an), and there is a tendency to give short shrift to the communities that made and sustained these canons. This is as true of scholars of religion and of literature as it is of some modernist-minded Muslim intellectuals.¹⁵ But to refer to a canon, based on its representation in modern literature provides a corrective to some of our contemporary prejudices.

The second reason for emphasizing the canon is the fact that the Qur'an is not entirely analogous to the Bible, and we cannot, as many apparently wish to do, simply import methods and goals from biblical to qur'anic studies. Nor can we assume that literature inspired by the Islamic canon will resemble literature inspired by the biblical canon.

A description of the Qur'an's contents will seem very familiar to one acquainted with the Bible: prayers, laws governing diet, marriage, some historical material, eschatological warnings and threats, and many passages on the divine qualities of power and mercy belonging to the One True God. Such familiarity will be misleading, though, if one does not recognize that this content is presented in a very different form. The Qur'an does not present information in standard historical narrative form, nor is it divided according to the type of material it contains. It is very repetitive in places and the narrative materials it does contain are either fragmented or extremely allusive. However, it may be precisely these qualities that are frustrating for the newcomer that Muslims have taken as indicators of its divine provenance and outstanding literary merits.

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 5–6.

¹⁵ See Chase F. Robinson, "Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert Berg (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 101–134, esp. 108, 124.

As I mentioned at the outset, the Islamic tradition has been much more consistently appreciative of the rhetorical and literary merits of its scripture. However, what constitutes "literary merit" can and did differ substantially across time and place. Largely unlike the Bible, the Qur'an has been the exemplar for Arabic stylistics, enormously influential in poetry, prose and in determining the standards of literary criticism and later theory.¹⁶ However, these standards were inextricably linked to the Arabic language (the Qur'an translated was no longer the direct word of God) and to the expression of a number of formal rhetorical devices. Thus literary usage of qur'anic material was often on the level of words, phrases, imagery or motifs.

Along with this type of usage (words, phrases, motifs) comes a high degree of referentiality, the Qur'an and its language being such powerful symbols that they refer back to the Qur'an regardless of meaning or context. Here we encounter what may be called the "sensual" aspect of scripture. This is an aspect that is somewhat less appreciated in our hyper-literate world; by "sensual" we mean the qualities of joy, fear, or simply the *frisson* of recognition that might be provoked by scriptural phrases and vocabulary.¹⁷ We do see this in Arabic writings, although on the level of narrative fiction it is somewhat more difficult to sustain.¹⁸ On the thematic level, though, qur'anic possibilities are more limited. With a few exceptions, thematic references (i.e., those based on an abstraction rather than a citation at the level of language or motif) require the material of the canon, and that is what we find in *Loin de Médine* and *The Satanic Verses*.

To further illustrate what I am calling thematic and linguistic influences of scripture, let us briefly consider the works of William Faulkner. On one level his writings are permeated with vocabulary and imagery from the Bible, and specifically from the King James Version. In this there is a strong parallel with Arabic literature and the language of the Qur'an, as scriptural motifs are cited, amplified or modified, deployed

¹⁶ For a good overview see Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Arabic Poetics, Classical," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), s.v.

¹⁷ On the "sensual" aspect, see William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 6–7, 162–171.

¹⁸ A good recent example of working early Islamic motifs and qur'anic language and diction into a modern novel is *al-Walī al-ṭāhir* ("Saint Tahir") (1999), by the Algerian novelist al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār.

in earnest or in jest. In Faulkner's use of narrative, though, we find "intricate correspondences (and ironic divergences) between Faulkner's plot and the biblical one."¹⁹ Examples of this sort of scriptural usage would be the Passion Week framework of *The Sound and the Fury*, the Christ-figure of "The Bear," and the allusions to the Book of Samuel lurking underneath *Absalom, Absalom!* The King James Bible is, for Faulkner, a mine of material and inspiration as well as a background against which the modern narrative can be held in relief, tested as to both its fidelity and its originality.

Although not numerous, similar cases of borrowing scriptural narrative do exist in the Islamic sphere, but as I have tried to emphasize, it is necessary to expand our notion of the Islamic canon to include not just the Qur'an but the life of the Prophet and the history of the early community. It is interesting that "fictional transfigurations" of Jesus are numerous, but other than Rushdie's well-known efforts, the Muslim world, by and large, has not seen like allegorizing of its prophet.²⁰ The Prophet himself is fairly ubiquitous, of course, and it is interesting that the insistence on the historicity of the canonical material has by and large mitigated against figurative interpretation of salvation history.²¹ (This and the belief that Muhammad is the last of the prophets has apparently impeded even figurative representations.) The rise of the Arabic novel and other new literary forms in the first half of the twentieth century saw a number of rewritings of the prophetic biography, notably those of Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, Ṭahā Ḥusayn, and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm. None of these, though, permit of "ironic divergences," or allow any ambiguity to enter the narrative, and that is one of the reasons that *Loin de Médine* and *The Satanic Verses* are so striking in their conceptions, in that they dare to diverge from history and hagiography.

Is it possible to account for the diverging literary paths of the Islamic and biblical canons? Perhaps, but it is a daunting proposal. This essay began with reference to the Muslim dogma of the Qur'an's rhetori-

¹⁹ Alter, 6.

²⁰ See, for example, Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). Of course this is not to deny the presence of allegory in Islamic writings—it is especially prevalent in modern Arabic literature. See also Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Ibn Sīnā* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

²¹ See Nasr Abu Zayd "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23 (2003), 8–47.

cal supremacy, and to the fact that while the Islamic revelation has long been admired for its literary virtues, this has not always been the case with the Bible. Once again, however, one should not draw hasty conclusions from this observation. In an article of the sort that many Islamicists would frown upon today, G.E. von Grunebaum drew some conclusions about the centrality of the Qur'an to literary and linguistic scholarship:

The knowledge of the Western theologian that the Biblical books were redacted by different writers and that they were, in many cases, accessible to him only in (inspired) translation facilitated admission of formal imperfections in Scripture and therewith lessened the compulsive insistence on its stylistic authority. Christian teaching, leaving the inspired writer, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, free in matters of style, has provided no motivation to seek an exact correlation between the revealed text on the one hand and grammar and rhetoric on the other... It thereby relieved the theologian and the critic from searching for a harmony between two stylistic worlds, which at best would yield an ahistoric concept of literary perfection and at worst would prevent anything resembling textual and substantive criticism of Revelation...²²

Now, some will accuse von Grunebaum of cultural chauvinism here, and they may well be justified in doing so. However, he does at least address directly the vexed question of how the interpretive life of the Qur'an has differed from that of the Bible, and demonstrates, inadvertently, both the difficulty and the potential sensitivity of the question.

In this brief essay I have emphasized two aspects of the very broad topic of Qur'an and literature (or Qur'an as literature). The first, stemming mainly from my position as a student of religion in general and Islam in particular, is the necessity to distinguish between the scholar's interpretation of a texts, and the role and function of those texts in the life of the historical community of believers or adherents. This was characterized, with Michael Zwettler's definitions, as the difference between "revelation" and "scripture." There are many instances when the text of revelation itself should be the object of study, such as philological or purely literary/rhetorical investigations, but if one intends to speak of the religious tradition, of Judaism or Christianity or Islam, then one must deal with the scriptures according to the parameters set by the community, with data that is the product of the community and not of

²² G.E. von Grunebaum, "T'djāz," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954–2004), s.v.

the scholar's own ingenuity. One need not (some would say should not) recognize the theological claims nor the veracity of salvation history, but one must acknowledge the fact that believers have and continue to take such claims seriously, and that these claims on behalf of scripture exercised an authority shaping behavior and opinion.

The second point is that although the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an are all examples of monotheist revelation-cum-scripture, this categorization may be misleading if we make unwarranted assumptions or analogies about other traditions. Literary studies are particularly susceptible to such generalizations if the object of study has been isolated from the social, intellectual and historical milieux that made it scripture and gave it authority.

Although there are many ways in which the Qur'an differs from the Bible, I concentrated here on scriptural influence on later literatures, and specifically on the two novels by Assia Djebar and Salman Rushdie. The Bible has long been a source of inspiration in Western writings, and I endeavored to show that a similar situation obtains in the Islamic realm, but that we would do better to broaden our focus from the Qur'an alone to a canon which would include not just the text of revelation but also the life of the Prophet and the first generations of believers. Although there are many other possible examples, I think that Rushdie and Djebar's novels are good places to begin, for the canonical authority manifested in their novels is of a type readily recognizable to the comparativist. Further, *Loin de Médine* and *The Satanic Verses* are inexplicable without the notion of canon. They are novels that assume or take for granted the existence of a canon, and that canon comprises more than the text of revelation.

SIGN, ANALOGY, AND THE *VIA NEGATIVA*:
APPROACHING THE TRANSCENDENT GOD OF
THE QUR'AN¹

Rosalind Ward Gwynne

Amid all the similarities between the Qur'an, the New Testament, and the Hebrew Bible, the first-time reader may miss a significant difference in the rhetorical structure of the Qur'an: creation, history, prophecy, guidance, commandment, law, and the hereafter are all presented as elements in numerous patterns of reasoning. In this way the Qur'an engages the *intellect* of the hearer or reader, as well as his or her hopes, fears, uncertainties, failings, and virtues. The very existence of the Qur'an, which Muslims understand to be the actual speech of God, indicates an epistemological dilemma central to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths: by what means can human beings, with all their limitations, learn enough about the infinitely powerful and merciful God to understand their proper relation to him?

The question is implicit in the verses that Muslims understand to be the first revealed: "Recite! In the name of your Lord Who created, created the human being from a clot of blood... Who taught the human what he did not know" (Q 96:1-6). God is thus defined as the source of human existence and knowledge, and, by extension, of the human's inherent need for evidence and proof. Humans need to *know*, but how can they really know about God? God is also defined as unique, unknowable, beyond any human capacity for understanding. How, then, is this gap to be bridged? First, God provides the necessary observable evidence; then he uses the observable evidence as basis for comparison and analogy with what is beyond human powers to comprehend; and finally he reminds humans of his own incomprehensible nature, lest

¹ I have consulted the original and all of the following translations; however, all translations in the present text are my own unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Qur'an*, ed. and trans. A. Yusuf Ali (American Trust Publications, 2nd edition, 1977). *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, ed. and trans. M. Marmaduke Pickthall (New American Library (Mentor), n.d. *Qur'an Karim* (Cairo: al-Ahram, 1972). *al-Qur'an al-Karim*, trans. Muhammad al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Madina, Saudi Arabia: King Fahd Complex, 1417/1996-1997).

they confuse themselves or any other created being with the Creator, the First and the Last.

Of the half-dozen words used to point out that a particular phenomenon is evidence of God's power, the most common is "sign" (*aya*, pl. *ayat*), which in its various forms occurs some 381 times in the Qur'an. Creation of a single human being is a divine sign, as is creation of humanity as a whole. "We created the human out of an essence of clay; then We placed him as a drop of sperm in a safe place; then We made the sperm into a clot, and the clot into a lump of flesh..." (Q 23:12–14). "Among His signs is that He created you from dust; then behold! you are human beings spread [far and wide]" (Q 30:20). Though the process is the same, the results are marvelously varied: "And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the differences in your languages and your colors. Truly in that are signs for those who know" (Q 30:22).

The last-quoted verse demonstrates that humanity is only one of the signs of God's power, for he has created all the wonders of the universe. The heavens and the earth, the alternation of night and day, ships at sea, life-giving rain, living creatures, winds and clouds are all "signs for people who can understand" (Q 2:164, cf. 21:30–33, 30:19–27, all of Q 55, etc.). "And the earth: He has spread it out for His creatures. In it are date-palms with sheathed fruit, and grain for fodder, and fragrant plants. So which of the blessings of your Lord will the two of you deny?" (Q 55:10–13). "And a sign for them is the dead earth. We revive it and bring forth from it grains that they eat; and in it We have made gardens of date-palms and grapes and opened the earth for springs to emerge, so that they may eat its fruit. Their own hands did not make it—so will they not give thanks?... And no sign from among the signs of their Lord comes to them but they turn away from it!" (Q 36:33–46).

Therein lies the problem. God gives humans the power to reason; he does not create belief as part of human nature or otherwise compel humans to believe, even though he certainly has the power to do so. All too often, despite God's "signs" to them, humans make the wrong choices, pick the wrong side in the argument, and "turn away" from the truth. Human history in the Qur'an is largely a history of such "turning away" and failing or refusing to recognize the source of these signs and that they are blessings by which God fulfills his part of the Covenant. Humans are the most argumentative of creatures (Q 18:54) and find numerous ways of missing the point. A prototypical member of the Qur'an's first audience "thought and plotted... then he frowned... then

he turned his back and was haughty. Then he said, "This is nothing but magic passed down, it is nothing but the word of a human being" (Q 74:18–25). When earlier prophets brought signs, the people rejected them and demanded others. Thus Pharaoh rejected the signs brought by Moses (Q 43:47–48), asking, "Why are golden bracelets not sent down with him, or angels sent to accompany him?" (Q 43:53). One of the ancient kings (usually identified as Nimrod) argued with Abraham about the nature of God—and was defeated—on the basis of relative power as represented by signs. "Abraham said, 'My Lord is the One Who gives life and death.' He said, 'I give life and death!' Abraham said, 'God causes the sun to rise in the east, so you make it rise from the west.' Thus he who rejected God was left speechless..." (Q 2:258).

Once God's existence and power have been established, other lines of argument establish details and corollaries using the same signs as evidence. Why is the vast universe the sign of a single deity and not a pantheon? "If there were deities other than God [in the heavens and the earth], then both would have come to ruin" (Q 21:22, cf. 23:91–92 below). How are human beings to know that God has the power to resurrect the dead? Often demonstrations of this point rest on an argument *a fortiori*: whoever is capable of the greater task is capable of the lesser. "Is not that [One Who creates the human from an embryo] capable of giving life to the dead?" (Q 75:37–40, cf. 17:51). "Do they not see that God, Who created the heavens and the earth and never wearied with their creation, is able to give life to the dead? Truly, He is capable of all things" (Q 46:33). Thus creation of humanity is not the supreme achievement. "The creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of human beings, but most people do not know" (Q 40:57).

Two other sorts of signs make explicit the connection between creation and God: prophets and scriptures. Prophets both speak and act; some bring scriptures. Not only do they explain God's signs, they themselves are signs of God's mercy to his creatures. A useful list of named prophets can be found in Q 6:83–87; it is followed by a summary of the messages they brought and some of the problems they faced (Q 6:88–94), and it concludes with a recital of the signs of God in nature (Q 6:95–102) much like those discussed above. "That was Our Proof (*hujjatuna*) which we gave to Abraham against his people... And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob... We guided Noah... David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron... Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias... Ishmael, Jonah, Lot..." (Missing from this list are the

"Arabian" prophets Hud and Salih.) God gave them "the Book and authority and prophethood" (Q 6:89; A. Yusuf Ali, p. 313); the Book that Moses brought is "a light and a guidance to humanity" (91); while this Book (i.e. the Qur'an) is "a confirmation of what they already have" (92). "Truly it is God who causes the seeds of grains and dates to split and sprout... He has set the stars for you to be guided in the darkness of land and sea... It is He Who sends down water from the sky..." (Q 6:95-99). "Visible proofs (*basa'ir*) have indeed come to you from your Lord" (Q 6:104).

Unlike the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Qur'an rarely presents the lives of the prophets (except Joseph in Q 12 and Moses in Q 7:102-156) as lengthy historical narratives; rather, it summarizes their messages, situations, and experiences according to the point being made, which is usually that earlier peoples rejected them and were therefore punished. Some suras (e.g. 7, 11, 21, 26, 29 to cite only a few) consist almost entirely of such sequences. If we look, for example, at Sura 21, called, appropriately, "The Prophets" (*al-Anbiya'*), we see that the tone is set by the initial verses, which console the Prophet Muhammad for facing what the prophets faced before him: "They say, 'Mixed-up dreams! No—he has made it all up! No—he is a poet! Let him bring us a sign like those brought by the earlier ones!'" (Q 21:5). This is followed by an extended general explanation of the mission of prophets and the difficulties they face—41 verses (Q 21:6-47), as contrasted with the six-verse summary in Sura 6—and then the prophetic sequence begins. Moses and Aaron are given the Torah (verses 48-50). The earlier prophet Abraham defeats his polytheist opponents in argument, is saved from the fire and made safe in a new land (51-71); offspring Isaac and Jacob, inspired and rightly guided leaders, are bestowed upon him (72-73); Lot receives wisdom and knowledge and is saved from his evil compatriots (74-75). Noah's people ignore the signs (*ayat*) and drown (76-77). David and Solomon receive wisdom, knowledge, and certain powers over nature (78-82). Ishmael, Enoch (Idris) and Dhu al-Kifl (sometimes identified with Ezekiel; see A Yusuf Ali, n. 2743) are patient and are saved (85-86), as is Jonah (87-88). The childless Zachariah prays and is given John as a son, as the virgin Mary is given Jesus (89-91). Now the hearers are reminded, "This, your religion (*ummatukum*), is one religion, and I am your Lord. Therefore worship Me" (92; s.a. Pickthall, p. 240). The sura concludes with a description of the Day of Judgment, the rewards of the believers, and the punishments of those who reject this, the final Message (93-112).

The virgin birth of Jesus son of Mary is an example of another sort of “sign”, not a divinely created component of everyday life but what may be called a “miracle” (*muʿjiza*), defined by the 14–15th century theologian al-Sharif al-Jurjani as “something that breaks precedent, summons to goodness and well-being, connected with a claim to prophethood, by which it is intended to demonstrate the sincerity of one who claims that he is a messenger from God.”² God speaks to Moses from the fire, shows him his hand white but without any defect, and turns his stick into a snake (Q 20:10–23, 28:29–32), which later overcomes the magic of Pharaoh’s sorcerers and turns them into believers (Q 20:62–73). Jesus is born of a virgin, speaks in the cradle, cures the blind and the leper, brings the dead to life, and creates clay birds into which he breathes and which then take life and fly away (Q 5:110, s.a. 3:49–50, 19:29–33; cf. the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* for the story of the birds).

Not all divine signs are constructive. God demonstrates his power to Moses by turning a mountain to dust (Q 7:143), but most divine disasters afflict disbelievers. The cataclysms visited upon deniers of the prophets are signs of God that come too late for their people but in time for subsequent generations to observe and understand. Noah’s flood (Q 29:14–15, 71ff.; 11:25–48); the drowning of Pharaoh’s forces (Q 2:50); the curse upon the people of ‘Ad (Q 11:60); and the fates of the people of Thamud (Q 11:67), Sodom (Q 11:82), and Midian (Q 11:94) are all lessons for the audience of the Qur’an. “That is some of the history of the cities which We narrate to you: some are [still] standing and some have been mowed down. We did not wrong them—they wronged themselves. Thus the deities upon whom they called besides God did nothing for them when the command of your Lord was given... In that there is a sign for him who fears the punishment of the hereafter...” (Q 11:100–103).

The Qur’an as a whole is, of course, a sign of God, as are the scriptures brought by the earlier prophets. If scripture is a sign of God, then by extension its individual verses are also signs. One of the most common meanings of the word *aya* in everyday usage is “a verse of the Qur’an”. “*Alif lam raʾ*. [This is] a Book, the verses of which (*ayatuhu*) are firmly established, then explained in detail, from One Who is All-Wise, All-Knowing” (Q 11:1–2). In addition, both the style and contents of the

² al-Sharif ‘Ali al-Jurjani b. Muhammad, *Kitab al-Taʾrifat* (*The Book of Definitions*) (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1969), p. 234.

Qur'an are asserted as proofs of its divine origin. "This Qur'an is not something that could be produced by anything less than God but is confirmation of what they already have in their hands and explanation of the Book in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds. Or do they say, 'He has forged it'? Say, 'Then produce a sura like it, and call upon whomever you can besides God, if you are telling the truth!'" (Q 10:37–38; s.a. 2:23, 11:13). An additional argument for divine origin is a verse that comes in the midst of yet another passage presenting the serial revelation of scriptures as signs of God. Lest it be thought that Muhammad himself was the source of the Qur'an, the verse says, "And you [Muhammad] had never read a book before it, nor had you written one with your right hand; in that case, the idle chatterers might indeed have doubted" (Q 29:48). On this basis, Muslims believe that an illiterate man (s.a. Q 7:157–158) in a largely illiterate society could never have produced a book containing histories of which he had no experience, in a style that human beings could never equal.

Occasional episodes in Islamic history concern people who are alleged to have accepted the challenge and attempted to equal or surpass the Qur'an, in particular Muhammad's rival and contemporary, the "false prophet" Musaylima (Ibn Ishaq, pp. 636–637),³ and the poet al-Mutanabbi (915–965), whose *nom de plume* means "the pretender to prophethood."

Besides ignoring his signs, stubborn humans sometimes justify their turning away from God by creating false analogies. They reject prophets because they are mere mortals, unremarkable in the community. The chiefs of Noah's people say, "We see that you are only a man like ourselves, and we do not see that any follow you except the lowest among us..." (Q 11:27). The people of 'Ad refuse to repent or to ask forgiveness of God for their worship of other deities on the grounds that the prophet Hud has brought them no sign (here the word used is *bayyina*), failing to recognize that the very presence of such a person is a sign to be taken seriously (Q 11:50–53). Indeed, the nature of prophethood is that like is sent to like, and always has been. "And before you We sent [no one] as messengers except men whom We inspired; ask the people who have [already] been sent the Message, if you do not know" (Q 16:43 and 21:7). "And We never sent before you any messengers

³ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. ed. and trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford, 1980), pp. 636–637.

but those who ate food and walked about in the markets..." (Q 25:20, s.a. 21:7-8; 25:7-8). "And nothing prevented people from believing when the Guidance came to them, except that they said, 'Has God sent a human as messenger?' Say, 'If on earth there were angels walking securely about, We would have sent down to them from heaven an angel as messenger'" (Q 17:94-95). Even the devil uses an analogy when he refuses to bow down to Adam. "We said to the angels, 'Bow down to Adam', and they bowed down, except for Iblis [Satan]...[God] said, 'What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?' [Satan] said, 'I am better than he: You created me from fire, and you created him from clay.'" (Q 7:11-12, s.a. 38:76).

Some "People of the Book", that is, Jews and Christians who remained such without accepting Islam as the message of the last in the line of God's prophets, are charged with failing to see how Muhammad's mission conformed to the examples of the earlier prophets, even with concealing its significance. This reminds us that the word for "disbelief", *kufir*, at its root means "concealment." "Oh, People of the Book! Why do you disbelieve (*takfuruna*) in the Signs (or verses—*ayat*) of God, while God is Witness to what you are doing?" (Q 3:98). "And before you We did not send as messengers anyone but men whom We inspired—ask the People of the Scripture (*ahl al-dhikr*) if you do not know—with signs (*al-bayyināt*) and scriptures (*al-zubur*). And We have also sent you [Muhammad] down with the Scripture (*al-dhikr*), to clarify to humanity what has been sent down to them. Perhaps they will reflect on it!" (Q 16:43-44).

Analogy and comparison, however misused by humans, are nevertheless indispensable tools for expanding human cognition. Humans on their own cannot understand the scope and depth of the wonders of creation as God knows them, and so the Qur'an uses the evidence of signs as terms of comparison and analogy. We have already seen examples of this in the comparison of reviving the dead to creating the living being, the latter being the more difficult (Q 75:37-40, 17:51, 75:37-40). One of the best known analogies in the Qur'an is found in the long "verse of Light": "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His Light is like a niche in which there is a lamp... Its oil illuminates almost without fire touching it. Light upon Light! God guides to His Light whom He wills..." (Q 24:35).

Some of the Divine Names mentioned in Q 7:180 belong to another form of analogy, that which applies to God descriptions normally used for superior human beings. Clearly, such terms as "the First and the

Last” (*al-awwal wa-l-akhir* Q 57:3), “the Most Merciful of the merciful” (*arham al-rahimin* e.g. Q 7:151), “the Creator” (*al-khaliq, al-badi‘*, etc.) belong only to God, while others (generous/*karim*; wise/*hakim*; living/*hayy*; just/*adil*, etc.) are common terms for humans characterized by those virtues regardless of their political or social standing. But another indicator of superiority, “king” (*malik*), is used in the Qur’an only for human monarchs and for God. The only named king is Saul (Q 2:247); David and Solomon are not given the title but are presumably covered by Moses’ reminder in Q 5:20: “Remember the favor that God bestowed upon you when he sent prophets among you and made you kings.” God as king, however, is most vividly illustrated in a verse that includes three royal epithets: “Praise be to God, the True King! There is no deity but He, Lord of the noble Throne” (Q 23:116). The second of the titles, “Lord” (*rabb*), occurs more than 1000 times in the Qur’an—never with the definite article (*al-rabb* = *the* Lord) but always in construct with another noun or pronoun⁴ or (sometimes) in the indefinite. “Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds” (Q 1:2). “Recite! in the name of your Lord Who created, created humanity from a clot of blood” (Q 96:1–2). “Peace! A word from a most merciful Lord!” (Q 36:58). That it also applies to humans, however, can occasionally be seen, notably in Q 12:50, in which the king sends his messenger to Joseph seeking his expertise in dream interpretation, and Joseph says, “Return to your lord (*rabbika*) and ask him what the women were thinking who cut their hands”, as the first step in reversing his wrongful accusation of attempted rape. The word sometimes occurs in the plural: “They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords (*arbaban*) to the exclusion of God...” (Q 9:31).

The third element in the analogy with kingship is the word “throne” (*‘arsh*), also associated with the word “chair” (*kursiy*). Solomon has a chair (Q 38:34), the Queen of Sheba has a throne (Q 27:23–44), and God has both a chair (Q2:255) and a throne (Q 7:54 and some 20 others). Indeed, one of the most frequently quoted and calligraphed verses is Q 2:255, the “Verse of the Throne” (*ayat al-kursiy*): “God! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-sustaining... His chair (or throne—*kursiy*) encompasses the heavens and the earth...” Many theological arguments have addressed the nature of throne and chair—meanings of the words,

⁴ Daniel Gimaret, *Les Noms Divins en l’Islam* (Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1988), 318.

their relationship, their relative sizes, and especially whether they are actual or metaphorical. How can the infinite Deity sit upon a material throne, however large? Is this literally true or is it an analogy? Details of these debates are far beyond the scope of this chapter; suffice it to say that opinions on these verses ranged from “literally true” to “true but we don’t know how” to “completely metaphorical”. Our final word on the subject of the throne comes from the anti-literalist Mu‘tazilite theologian Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), who remarked that ascribing a throne to God did not mean that God sat on it any more than calling the Ka’ba the “house of God” meant that God lived in it.⁵ This brings us to another set of words long the subject of similar theological debates. More than one verse mentions God’s hand or God’s face; one speaks of God’s eye. “Bounty is in the hand of God” (Q 3:73). “Those who pledge allegiance to you [Muhammad] are pledging allegiance to God. God’s hand is over their hands...” (Q 48:10). “To God belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn there is the Face of God. Truly God is all-encompassing, all-knowing” (Q 2:115). “Everything passes away except His Face” (Q 28:88). “I sent down upon you [Moses] love from Me so that you could be raised under My Eye” (Q 20:39). Clearly, virtues normally associated with physical and mental strengths are the bases for many other Divine Names—powerful/*qahhar*, ‘*aziz*, *jabbar*; all-knowing/*khahir*, ‘*alim*, *hasib*, all-seeing/*basir*, *shahid*; all-hearing/*sami‘* (see Gimaret for an exhaustive list). But the sheer physicality of hand, face, and eye seem to have assured most of even the earliest exegetes that the terms were metaphors. To take just one example from al-Tabari (d. 923), various authorities have interpreted “face” in Q 2:155 as direction of prayer, presence, God himself, or—the last possibility—an actual physical attribute (*sifa*) of God.⁶ (*Tafsir*, I, pp. 402–403).

There is a potential problem with such analogies, however, in that the audience may all too easily mistake them for comparisons between material beings, equating identity of terminology with identity of essence. Thus the Qur’an constantly alerts human beings to the fact that such failures of reasoning weaken faith or may annul it entirely. The first step is to preserve the unicity of God from the misconceptions of previously existing faiths. “They have rendered the *jinn* [“genies”,

⁵ Rosalind Gwynne, *The Tafsir of Abu ‘Ali al-Jubba‘i* (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1982).

⁶ Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. *Jami‘ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*. Beirut: Dar al-Jil, n.d. (Reprint of Bulaq edition?).

or in Pickthall's phrase, "elemental spirits", some of them believers and some not; see Sura 72, "The Jinn"] as partners to God, though He created them; and falsely attributed, without knowledge, sons and daughters to Him. May He be exalted (*ta'ala*) above their [material] description!" (Q 6:100). "They have certainly disbelieved who say that God is the third of three" (Q 5:73). "God did not take a son, nor was there any god with Him. If so, each would have taken away what he created, and some would be superior to others. Glory to God over their [material] description! Knower of the unseen and the seen—may He be exalted over their attribution of partners (*ta'ala 'amma yushrikun!*)" (Q 23:91–92). "Is there a god with God? *Ta'ala 'amma yushrikun!*" (Q 27:63, s.a. 10:18, 16:1 and 3, 28:68, etc.). The last phrase, of course, refers to *shirk* (polytheism), the most serious sin in Islam. The word *ta'ala*, usually translated in the same way as when it follows mention of the name of God in written and spoken discourse—that is, as a wish or oath—might also be construed as a simple indicative: "He has transcended all that they associate with Him".

Virtually every religious tradition has faced the difficulties inherent in analogy and metaphor by systematic denial, a method long known in the West as the *via negativa*: "God is not this, not that." All resemblances between the Absolute and that which is contingent must be negated in every way possible. It is worth pointing out that, in the Qur'an, one of the most important forms of negation begins with the grammatical particle usually known in English as "the *la* of absolute negation" and in Arabic as "the *la* of negating the genus" (*la al-nafiya lil-jins*)—a designation especially significant in the Qur'anic context. "God! There is no deity but He, (*la ilaha illa huwa*), the Living, the Self-sustaining..." (Q 2:255, s.a. 6:102, 59:22).

Another method is a sort of reversal in which God is, as it were, the subject and not the object of every applicable verb. "Human vision does not encompass Him: He encompasses human vision" (Q 6:103). "He is not to be asked about what He does, but *they* will be asked" (Q 21:23). "He protects but cannot be protected against" (Q 23:88).⁷

He is not subject to physical limitations: "Neither slumber nor sleep can take Him" (Q 2:255). "Everything passes away except His Face" (Q 28:88). Another sort of pairing asserts God's power over opposites:

⁷ Rosalind Gwynne. *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's Arguments* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 137.

"He gives life and brings death" (Q 2:258, 3:156, 7:158, etc.). "God leads astray whom He will and guides whom He will..." (Q 14:4). "You [God] cause the night to enter the day and you cause the day to enter the night. You bring the living out of the dead and you bring the dead out of the living" (Q 3:27; s.a. al-Hilali and Khan, p. 71).

Finally, the verses most often quoted to avoid the temptation of anthropomorphism are Q 42:11, "There is nothing like Him", and the entire 112th sura of the Qur'an. *Surat al-Ikhlās* is variously translated as the sura of "Unity" (Pickthall) or "Purity (of Faith)" (Ali); the word in everyday Arabic means "sincerity." "Say: 'He, God, is One; God is the Absolute (Eternal, Self-sufficient). He did not beget nor was He begotten; and there is none comparable to Him'" (Q 112:1-4).

Using these and other methods, the Qur'an instructs its human audience on three levels, corresponding to their three levels of understanding. First, the Qur'an makes it clear that the visible universe is subject to ordered control, and that human beings have the capacity to understand the evidence for this in the form of signs both ordinary and extraordinary. Second, the Qur'an uses comparison and analogy to expand some of the limits on human understanding, enabling humans to use their immediate first-hand experiences to draw conclusions about matters not accessible to the senses. Third, the Qur'an informs humans that there are absolute limits to their understanding, and that there is a radical and fundamental difference between finite creation—however vast and varied that might be—and its Infinite Creator.

FORCE DYNAMICS AND THE QUR'ÂN:
AN ESSAY IN COGNITIVE QUR'ÂNIC POETICS

Thomas Hoffmann

A Pandemonium of Forces: Kinetics, Semantics and the Qur'ân

Our world seems to comprise a pandemonium of forces: there are forces exerted and forces resisted, forces obstructed and forces released. Force adds direction to what otherwise would appear truly chaotic; things move in a particular direction because force is involved. Or the opposite; things are brought to a standstill or they resist and remain in position. Either way, force appears as a fundamental kinetic phenomenon involving at least two entities displaying a tendency to either action or rest, a tendency that inevitably results in a balance of strength in which one entity turns out weaker or stronger than the other. Sometimes we experience such forceful interactions from a safe distance, and sometimes we are actively, even fatally, involved in them.

Though all this may give the reader the impression of an enthusiastic introduction to the world of physics, in our case it pertains ultimately to the world of language and cognition, more specifically, cognitive semantics. Even more specifically, it pertains to the unique semantic world of the Qur'ân—Islam's sacred scripture par excellence. Given that we include *cognition* in our semantic stipulation it follows that we approach the Qur'ân from the perspective of a elementary human condition, being a messy condition of brains, bodies, and environments. From this almost crude claim, a somewhat grand hypothesis emerges: that the ubiquity of physical, causal, kinetic forces—being our phenomenological experience of such forces—interact with and give rise to certain basic pre-verbal conceptual schemas in our conceptual systems (basically our brains), which then impose themselves on our linguistic endeavours in grammar, syntax, and semantics (and where metaphors and metaphorical expressions hold a particular important role). In other words: the schematic pre-verbalised notions of force are inaugurated as dynamic linguistic expressions of force. In short: as force dynamic expressions. Such expressions are wide-spread to degree of ubiquity: from syntactical from everyday expressions like,

for instance, 'I can't stand it' or 'I was moved to tears' to the highly imaginative and intricate specimen of literature like, for instance, Dylan Thomas' famous first stanza of "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower":

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.¹

The overarching intellectual framework supporting our initial grand hypothesis is cognitive linguistics, an emerging and cross-disciplinary enterprise of cognitive science and linguistics. Cognitive science could be described as the interdisciplinary study of mind and intelligence, utilizing insights from philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology. According to a *sensus communis*, cognitive linguistics could be characterized as an enterprise that

approaches language as an integrated part of human cognition which operates in interaction with and on the basis of the same principles as other cognitive faculties. C[ognitive] L[inguistics] is therefore defined as a linguistic theory which analyzes language in its relation to other cognitive domains and faculties such as bodily and mental experiences, image-schemas, perception, attention, memory, viewing frames, categorization, abstract thought, emotion, reasoning, inferencing, etc.²

The theoretical and methodological import from the cognitive sciences as well as cognitive linguistics has been noteworthy in religious studies, especially within the fields of ritual studies, psychology of religion and what could be termed 'evolution and religion'-studies. Also worth mentioning is the rise of cognitive trends in Biblical studies, a trend Qur'anic studies should be wise not to ignore according to the present author.³

¹ Retrieved 20th November 2008: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15379>.

² René Dirven, "Major Strands in Cognitive Linguistics," in *Cognitive Linguistics: internal dynamics and interdisciplinary interaction*, eds. F.J.R. Ibáñez de and M.S.P. de Cervel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 17. For a recent resume of cognitive linguistics, see Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ Notice the recent boom in cognitive orientation in Biblical studies, e.g. K. Fayearts (ed.), *Metaphors and God-Talk* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999); K. Fayearts (ed.), *The Bible*

Force Dynamics in Religious Language: The Qur'ânic Example

Harking back to our initial grand hypothesis, we readily acknowledge that the specific impetus behind it springs from the work of the North American linguist Leonard Talmy, one of the most central cognitive linguistic in the last fifteen years.⁴ Of Talmy's several contributions his theory about so-called Force Dynamics⁵ has received much attention and been partially incorporated into other cognitive scientists' theoretical frameworks, e.g., in the works of Mark Johnson, Steven Pinker, and Ray Jackendoff.⁶ Following Talmy our semantic—and *eo ipso* linguistic—worlds are infused with force-orientated notions: compulsion, blockage, counterforce, release, attraction, repulsion being the most archetypal force dynamic propensities. In short: we construe the world in terms of entities interacting with respect to force.

Holding a further presentation of Force Dynamics in abeyance until the next section, we now endeavour to put forward a more specific and discourse-sensitive hypothesis, namely that religious language, too, is constrained by and betrays these force dynamics schemes. That religious language, like any other rhetorical and genre-dependent language, betrays force dynamic foundations and effects.⁷ Religious language is literally *forceful*, that is, full of interacting forces as, for instance, attested in cosmogonical myths, in ethical scenarios of good

Through Metaphor and Translation. A Cognitive Semantic Perspective (Bern, Peter Lang, 2003); Ellen van Wolde, *Job 28. Cognition in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); M.B. Szlos, "Body Parts as Metaphor and the Value of a Cognitive Approach," in *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. P. van Hecke (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 185–196; P. van Hecke, "Conceptual Blending: A Recent Approach to Metaphor. Illustrated with the Pastoral Metaphor in Hos 4,16," in *ibid.*, 215–232; D.H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities. Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve Sweetser, "Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor," *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2005, 207–238.

⁴ Most comprehensively presented in Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics, Language, Speech, and Communication*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 409–470.

⁶ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), Ray Jackendoff, "Conceptual semantics and cognitive linguistics", *Cognitive Linguistics*, 7, 1, 1996, 93–129.

⁷ For a rhetorical analysis of two speeches (i.e., Abraham Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address* and George W. Bush Jr.'s preamble to *The National Security Report*) utilizing force dynamic theory, see Todd Oakley, "Force-dynamic dimensions of rhetorical effect," Beate Hampe (ed.), *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 443–473.

and evil, in descriptions of bodily and spiritual sensations, in natural and super-natural entities, and in more or less dogmatic key words. Though this hypothesis is somewhat overambitious, we recognize that in terms of analysis the present essay is only a modest attempt to pull off the Force Dynamic theory vis-à-vis the Qur'ānic text.

While different religious discourses might prove to exhibit different force dynamic profiles, we stipulate that obvious force dynamic semantics can be attested in Islamic discourse, specifically in the Qur'ānic text. Thus, as a first example, the following Qur'ānic verses, i.e., Q 82:1–4, can be forwarded:

- ¹When heaven is split open,
- ²when the stars are scattered,
- ³when the seas swarm over,
- ⁴when the tombs are overthrown⁸

Cosmos falls apart: the coherent covering of the firmament is torn, the fixed positions of the stars are disrupted, the otherwise constant level of the seas rises, and—most terrifying—graves are being turned inside out. Exactly what it is that causes these *eschaton*, 'last things', to happen is not explicitly stated but must be inferred from the surrounding context,⁹ yet it remains obvious that the different phenomena's natural *modi operandi* are being fatally upset, caused by powerful, extraordinary—yet undesigned—forces. At the other end of the spectrum, namely 'first things' Another example is provided by two verses, Q 25:45–46, dealing with foundational cosmology, evoke a much less violent scenario, in fact one of serene pliability:

- ⁴⁵Hast thou not regarded thy Lord, how He has stretched out the shadow?
Had He, He would have made it still. Then We appointed the sun, to
be a guide to it.

- ⁴⁶Then We seize it to Ourselves, drawing it gently.

In these verses, we witness an imaginative conception of the shadow. The visible but otherwise intangible shadow is first depicted as a stretchable substance that God—if he should choose to do so—can cut short.

⁸ If not otherwise indicated, all translations are from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*. Retrivable and searchable from: <http://arthursclassiconovels.com/arthurs/koran/koran-arberry10.html>.

⁹ Q.v. the remarks on the evasiveness of explicit agents in the Qur'ān's eschatological imagery by Frederik Leemhuis, "Apocalypse," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, eds. McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006).

Then the shadow is brought into conjunction with its 'anti-body' and 'co-pilot,' the sun. Finally, in a somewhat ambivalent expression, God draws 'it' (shadow or sun) towards him in a calm diurnal rhythm. From the interacting keywords 'stretch,' '(stand)still,' 'guide,' 'seize,' 'draw (gently),' we conjure up a very dynamic and forceful scenario betraying horizontal, vertical, and slanted directions, all couched in an idiom both sensuous and economical.

When dealing with Qur'ânic imagery, there is a tendency to let ourselves being taken over by the visualistic drift in the term '*image-ry*.' Another tendency consists in privileging the auditory aspects; thus, conventionally we attend to the visionary tableaux of cosmology (the heterogeneous imagery), or we attend to the staccato sound patterns or the euphonic wholes. However, as the verses above should demonstrate, force dynamic aspects are clearly prominent too: there is a something like a deep push and pull built into the Qur'ânic textsemantic universe.

Being attentive to cognitive linguistic dynamics of force is thus vital if we want to comprehend not only the basic workings of religious language but also the sundry canons and scriptures and their specific semantic profiles—and yet force seems to be a very underdeveloped concept within philology and literary criticism.¹⁰

More on Force Dynamics

One of the most promising approaches today has been provided by cognitive linguistics and its rapidly proliferating sub- and cross-disciplines, especially cognitive poetics which attend to verbal art (of which we include the Qur'ân) and strive to integrate the insights from cognitive linguistics with more literary orientated stylistics.¹¹ By means of Talmy's Force Dynamics we shall attempt to forge new bonds between linguistics, philology, stylistics, exegesis and literary criticism;

¹⁰ An underdevelopment that is also noticed in Todd Oakley, "Force-dynamic dimensions of rhetorical effect," Beate Hampe (ed.), *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 443.

¹¹ E.g., Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), Per Aage Brandt, *Spaces, Domains, and Meanings: Essays in Cognitive Semiotics* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004). Line Brandt and Per Aage Brandt, "Cognitive Poetics and Imagery," *European Journal of English* (2005).

new bonds that hopefully could be exploited and elaborated in other studies of sacred texts.

In order to pursue these hypotheses the theory of Force Dynamics shall be outlined in more detail in conjunction with some additional pertinent examples. Furthermore, in order to corroborate that force dynamic semantics figure prominently in the Qur'ân and merit the status as a crucial analytical category, we shall deal briefly with elements of Arabic grammar, Qur'anic lexemes and verses. By way of conclusion, a tentative force dynamic poetics of the Qur'ân will be proposed.

A growing number of cognitive linguists now assert that a great part of abstract or metaphorical meaning have their *fons et origo* in on-going concrete bodily and socio-cultural experience as well as in the conceptual structures (the 'tacit knowledge' of our neurology) built and sustained throughout (human) evolution. This is also commonly known as the *embodiment* hypothesis and was first introduced the linguist George Lakoff and the philosophers and cognitive scientists Mark Turner and Mark Johnson. In co-authored landmark works like *Metaphors We Live By*, *More than Cool Reason* and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* they espoused the idea that thought (and subsequently language) works by means of metaphors.¹² Metaphors, they stated, are not merely stylistic devices but provide insight into mental patterns and schemas, patterns and schemas that often draw heavily on bodily/physical experience, i.e., embodiment and experientialism.¹³ To mention one primitive example; in the phrase 'Can you see what I mean', understanding is metaphorized by means of a visual metaphor, namely 'see', which ultimately spring from our faculty of vision. Some would object to this claim and tell us that this is nothing but a dead metaphor. Cognitive linguists, however, will reply that etymology and cross-linguistic studies often proves their point, just as they will object to the notion of 'dead metaphors' and instead suggest that we think of them as being capable of 'resurrection' or—less theologically loaded—as 'revitalization.' If we accept this basic premise we immediately realize that religious texts are permeated with

¹² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

¹³ For a survey of the different profiles of the embodiment hypothesis, see Tim Rohrer, "Embodiment and Experientialism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25–47.

metaphors and metaphorical structures. Metaphors cease to be local rhetorical violations but become an intrinsic part of the texts. This 'incarnate' cognitive approach to metaphor has brought about many studies of literary texts and remains one of the most accessible for non-linguists.

When we move on to Talmy's Force Dynamics we are still in close contact with metaphor theory. According to Talmy, Force Dynamics is a basic semantic category that describes "how entities interact with respect to force. Included here is the exertion of force, resistance to such a force, the overcoming of such a resistance, blockage of the expression of force, removal of such blockage, and the like."¹⁴ These very general aspects of force dynamics are not only elaborations on the linguistic notion of 'causative' (e.g., conjunctions like 'because, although', prepositions like 'against, despite' and in modals describing necessity, probability and possibility) but they also provide the matrix behind a sweeping variety of metaphorical extensions evoking psychological, social, argumentative and discursive interaction. A few primitive and constructed examples will suffice:

Table 1. Semantic domains and force dynamic instances

Semantic domains	Force dynamic instances
Psychological	'He withheld his urge to cry'
Social	'He is under a lot of pressure to accommodate'

Let us take a closer look on the force dynamic scenario. Minimally, it involves two entities interacting in a dynamic situation. These entities are respectively called the Agonist and the Antagonist, terms deriving from muscular physiology. Who or what takes the role as Agonist and Antagonist must be decided from case to case. The Agonist has a so-called natural tendency for either rest or action, whereas the Antagonist is able to exert a force on the Agonist. The crucial question, then, is whether the Agonist is able to carry out its tendency for rest or action or if the Antagonist's force overcomes the tendency or not.¹⁵ Talmy uses a somewhat complicated diagrammatic format in order to illustrate all conceivable combinations but for our purpose a table will suffice.

¹⁴ Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics, Language, Speech, and Communication*, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 409.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

Table 2. Basic force dynamic categories

Force entities	Agonist and Antagonist
Force tendency	Towards action (~motion) or towards inaction (~rest)
Result of force interaction	Action (~motion) or inaction (~rest)
Balance of strength	A stronger entity and a weaker entity

The Qur'ānic text often presents various combinations of force dynamic scenarios, but most of them seem to present steady-state scenarios or scenarios in which an Antagonist impinge on an Agonist. A steady-state scenario may, for instance, outline a continual state of affairs, as in Q 67:19:

¹⁹Have they not regarded the birds above them spreading their wings, and closing them? Nothing holds them up [*yumsikuhunna*] but the All-merciful.

Heaven's winged creatures are here presented as suspended Agonists that would stall and fall (their tendency) if it were not for the ever stronger Antagonist, the All-merciful.

Whereas an impingement-scenario could be exemplified in Q 94:1–4, a sūra traditionally understood as conveying God's consolation of his disheartened Prophet:

¹Did We not expand your breast for thee,

²and lift from thee thy burden,

³the burden that weighed down thy back,

⁴Did We not exalt thy fame?

In this existential sūra the implied addressee, the 'thee' (the implicit addressee being the prophet Muhammad), assumes the role of the Agonist and God (addressing in *pluralis majestatis*) the Antagonist. The here-and-now force tendency of the implied prophet gravitates towards inaction in the form of a constricted breast and a *depressed* posture whereas God is the Antagonist exerting force in the form of expansion and lifting. God, not surprisingly, overcomes the tendency of the Prophet and reveals himself as the stronger entity. Notice also how easily we balance the schematic force dynamics of physical dilation (of the breast), lifting, and weights with a much more airy cloud of metaphorical and existential associations. Emotional terms are frequently satiated with force dynamics notions leading to expressions like, for

instance, 'to restrict oneself,' 'to feel a pressure,' 'to let emotions loose,' 'to be on the brink of' and so forth.¹⁶

Verbal Forms and Forces: Pushing Some Further Examples

Before adducing any words and text samples it should be noted that certain grammatical categories in Arabic play a crucial force dynamic part. A particular prominent category concerns the so-called derived verbal forms: the Arabic (and Semitic) verb usually presumes a basic root form, usually consisting of three consonants, which can be extended and modified in meaning by way of certain supplementary letters.

We restrict ourselves to but a few instances.¹⁷ The so-called 2nd form, created by doubling the middle-root, originally signifies that an act is done with *great force*. It can therefore be applied in the so-called *intensive* form (sometimes designated as the *energicus*):¹⁸ for instance, 1st form *qatala* 'to kill, murder' will in the 2nd form *qattala* mean 'to massacre, cause carnage.' But it can also indicate a *causative* meaning. For instance, verbs that were intransitive in the first form turn transitive¹⁹ in the second, e.g.: 1st form *da'ufa* 'to be weak' → 2nd form *da'afa* 'to weaken.' Transitive verbs, then, can turn doubly transitive or causative, e.g.: 1st form *kataba* 'to write' → 2nd form *kattaba* 'to teach to write.' The 3rd form expresses *the effort or attempt to perform that act upon the object* and is established by lengthening the first vowel after the first root (consonant), e.g.: *qatalahu* 'he killed him' → *qâtalahu* 'he tried to kill him' or 'he fought with him'. When the 1st form denotes a quality or state, the 3rd form connotes *that one person makes use of that quality towards another and affects him thereby, or brings him into that state*. The 4th form also has a *factitive* or *causative* meaning and

¹⁶ For a force dynamics analysis of emotion, see Zoltán Kövecses, "Language, Emotion, Mind," in Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Kamila Turewicz (eds.) *Cognitive Linguistics Today*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002).

¹⁷ Examples and grammatical characterizations are taken from W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, vol. I, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 29–47.

¹⁸ For the significance of Qur'anic intensives, see Arne A. Ambros, "Syntactische und stilistische Funktionen des Energikus im Koran," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 79, 1989.

¹⁹ A transitive verb holds an object which is 'affected,' as it were, by the force of the verb, e.g., 'He wrote a book (transitive), then he disappeared (intransitive).'

comes into being by prefixing an ‘a’ to the first root and remove the first vowel after the first root, e.g.: 1st form *jarâ* ‘to run’ → 4th form *ajrâ* ‘to make run.’

All in all, Arabic operates with ten basic forms, but not all of them reveal force dynamic semantics. Much more could be said on these forms and other grammatical categories, but let us instead move on to the lexical items and their respective contexts. Granted, the following samples are somewhat *ad hoc* and only scratch the surface. However, they can suffice as eye-openers regarding the extensive force dynamic sway in Qur’anic semantics.

Table 3. Qur’anic lexemes and force dynamic instantiations

Root	Verb and glosses ²⁰	Qur’anic phrase	Dominant FD domain
M-S-K	<i>‘amsaka</i> (4th): to keep or retain someone, to hold something (prevent it from falling down).	Q 67:19: ‘Have they not regarded the birds above them spreading their wings, and closing them? <i>Nothing holds them up but the All-merciful.</i> ’	Spatial: up vs. down
H-B-S	<i>yahbisu</i> (1st): to detain someone, to hold back something.	Q 11:8: ‘If We defer their punishment for a determined time, they are sure to say, <i>‘What is holding it back?’</i> ’	Temporal: postponement or instantaneous result
R-W-D	<i>arâda</i> (4th): to wish, to will, to want to do something, to be on the verge of doing something.	Q 18:77: ‘There they found a wall that was <i>on the verge of falling down...</i> ’ ²¹	Modal/volitional: fuzzy border vs. clear-cut instance
S-D-D	<i>sadda</i> (1st): to turn away, bar, divert, hinder, discourage or dissuade someone from something.	Q 28:87: ‘Let them not <i>bar thee from</i> the signs of God.’	Epistemological: access vs. hindrance
K-Z-M	<i>Kâzimûn</i> (active participle): restraining, suppressing (an emotion)	Q 12:85: ‘And his eyes turned white [with tears] because of the sorrow that he choked within him.’	Emotional: poignancy vs. indifference
M-N-’	<i>mana’a/yamna’u</i> (1st): ‘to forbid, to bar or make something inaccessible’ (Q 2:114), <i>mannâ li-</i> ‘one who hinders, obstructs.’	Q 50:24–25: ‘Hurl every obstinate believer into Hell, every <i>hinderer of good.</i> ’	Ethical: action vs. hindrance

²⁰ The glosses are derived from Arne A. Ambros and Stephan Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004).

²¹ My translation.

These examples should not only have corroborated that the Qur'ân applies force dynamic language in order to express metaphorical and imaginative matters across a broad field of semantic domains: spatiality, temporality, modality, epistemology, emotions, and ethics. Based on these ad hoc samples it seems reasonable to suggest that a force dynamics poetics of the Qur'ân is viable undertaking for future Qur'ânic studies and, indeed, for literary studies as such.

Future Prospects: Drawing Nearer Theistic Force-Fields

According to the main premises of both cognitive linguistics/poetics and Talmy's theory of Force Dynamics, mind and language will exhibit a strong tendency to comply with the schemas and trajectories of force dynamic principles; not because it is logical or even 'true', but because we intuitively act and think like phenomenological minds and bodies. Though we *know* that it is the earth that is orbiting the sun and not the other way around, we nonetheless *experience* (and subsequently conceptualize) the sunrise as the upward movement of the sun.

Certainly, the present text examples were chosen to substantiate the assumption that even inspired scriptures like the Qur'ân demonstrate the outgrowth of the convoluted feedbacks between cognition and the ways of the world (i.e., its physical, social, and even phantasmagorical dimensions). If, however, a force dynamic poetics aspires to shed light on religious language, in particular theistic language, it needs to attend to the pervasive God-reference in these discourses; all things equal, 'God/*Allâh*/*Yahwe* is, after all, the most frequent and loaded evocation—or force-field—in theistic discourse.

Traditionally, two vexing questions have attracted theological and academic attention, and both regard the anthropomorphism of God, *Allâh*. The first one has to do with particular visual features and attributes like, for instance, God's hand (Q 48:10), his face (Q 2:115; 2:272; 30:38, 39:76:9), his throne (Q 7:54; 9:129; 10:3; 11:7 et passim), and other attributes. Did the Prophet, for instance, ever behold God in some kind of beatific vision,²² or was he only allowed to listen to Him? The latter question relates to the vocal and aural ontology of the Qur'ân, that is, the theological belief that the Qur'ân conveys the speech of God, *kalâm*

²² Q 53:5–18 have sometimes been interpreted as a vision of God.

Allāh, word perfect or, as it were, sense perfect. To counterbalance this visual, auditory, and logocentric penchant, we suggest that we not only attend to these theistic facets, but re-think the scholastic versions of the acting and causing God. Speaking in terms of Force Dynamics, conceiving God moves far beyond the great 'unmoveable Mover' delivering divine speech-acts and crafting more or less static world-tableaux. Construing the semantics of God in force dynamic fields of impingement, discharge, blockage, counterforce, enablement, attraction and repulsion could not only cast light on the unique characteristics of the Qur'ānic God, but also about human cognition/language and their co-opted bent for forceful semantics. For long, these facets of God have been appreciated intuitively in Muslim theology. Now it remains for scholars with research commitments to formulate and elaborate this insight within a secular and humanistic framework.

THE FUNCTION OF TROPIC STRUCTURES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

William W. Kimbrel, Jr.*

*Only in the stream of thought and life do words have
meaning.*

—Wittgenstein, *Zettel*

Introduction

Through language we are all of us implicated (even complicitous) in the lives and deaths of those around us. Fundamental to this concept of “implication” is the recognition that all human relations are grounded upon—embedded in—moral responsibilities. In other words, we are all “accountable,” not only for our actions, but for our use and misuse of the power of language. Indeed, this accountability is a defining characteristic of consciousness itself; it is a responsibility assumed by consciousness *qua* consciousness as it mediates the relationship between the body and language. Ernest Becker has stated that “the self is an arbitrary set of conventions designed to facilitate symbolic action: a locus of ideational and linguistic causality, governed by a self-referential ‘I’. The self we observe is largely a style of performance.”¹ But our lives are *not* a question of history as opposed to art, of objectivity as opposed to subjectivity, or even of truth as opposed to falsehood. They are rather a field of play wherein such terms are subsumed and where the profound naiveté of such dichotomies as these can be exposed and reworked into more meaningful, if also more transitory, structures. Life can be characterized as a question of the relations among the modes of discourse each of us feels compelled to utilize as he or she struggles

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¹ Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1971), 117.

to transform data into story, "object" into "subject." To complicate the matter further, unity, coherence, and relevance are side-effects of language, the connotations of an implicit and long forgotten metaphor which substitutes *self* for *language* and which interprets all such effects anthropomorphically. The claims of subjectivist philosophy to create an authentic self are thus profoundly called into question, as are objectivist claims to recover, concretely and accurately, the unity of lived experience.

The study of the New Testament can be an attempt to test such conclusions against inherited texts and against one's sense of "self." Among these texts, the Gospel of John has proven to be the most meaningful, the most resonant, and also the most problematic and troublesome. It is in this context that the words of Wittgenstein² that preface this essay have become something of a guide in the challenge to make sense of this most "spiritual" and self-referential of the Gospels. Adapting Wittgenstein's dictum to the exploration of John's Gospel, it becomes three questions: From what stream of life and thought does the meaning of the Fourth Gospel flow? How did the *Sitz im Leben*³ of this Gospel originate the structure, mode, and specific form of expression for the meaning it sought and still seeks to communicate? And in what sense is its "living Word" meaningful in today's life and thought? The first of these is an historical question. The third, a question of understanding (or hermeneutics). The second, however, is a combination of the two.

We must begin, then, with the simple recognition that we are all of us telling a story composed, as all stories are, of the inter-relationship of

² In the original German: "Nur in dem Fluß der Gedanken und des Lebens haben die Wort Bedeutung." From Fragment 173 in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright; trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967/rev. 2nd ed. 1981), 31–31e/30.

³ In Biblical criticism, *Sitz im Leben* is a German phrase translated roughly as "situation or setting in life." Basically, *Sitz im Leben* describes the occasions for which certain passages in the Bible were written, e.g., the "genres" of the Bible, such as letters, lamentations, parables, psalms, and songs. But *Sitz im Leben* can also involve other considerations, such as who the speaker of a passage was, his or her role in life, the nature of the audience hearing or reading the passage, and so on, all of which can affect interpretation. Taken out of its original context, therefore, the original meaning of a passage can be lost. The term is also used outside theological research to examine the sociologically relevant aspects of a text. In linguistics, the *Sitz im Leben* is determined by text pragmatics, that is, the study of how natural language speakers communicate more than what is explicitly stated, again affecting interpretation. (Cf. This paper's epigraph from Wittgenstein: "in dem Fluß...des Leben..."/"in the stream...of life...", which is preceded by the cryptic observation "Es kommt drauf an, wer's sagt"/"It all depends on *who* says it.")

characters and setting and focused upon the actions of its protagonist. We must recognize that we deal all our lives in fictions and that truth itself then is a fiction, or rather that there is only the truth of *story*, while objectivity is simply a fictional ploy. Consequently, we must develop an ironic awareness of the limitations of narrative, inhibited as we are by the necessity both to present the physical evidence of life responsibly and accurately and to persuade both ourselves and others that the consciousness of one human being can be presented to that of another through the medium of conventional linguistic discourse.

"Only in the Stream...": The Problem

The hermeneutic strategy of the Fourth Gospel stems directly, organically, from its historical situation. Written from the post-Easter perspective of the first century Johannine community still struggling with the diminution of its eschatological expectations, the Fourth Gospel begins the task of teaching its readers—whether Hellenized Jew or crypto-Christian of the first century, or secularized Christian or pagan of the twenty-first—how to understand it. The modern reader especially, whatever his or her reason for coming to the Gospels, must keep in mind that, "even though the work of Christ represented the climax or center of God's purposes for Israel and the world,"⁴ God's mode of revelation through Jesus was unexpected. Paul might emphasize "that Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3),⁵ and in doing so rely upon the traditional formula "in accordance with the scriptures" to "provide the pattern of divine action and promise which makes the cross and resurrection intelligible as an act of God,"⁶ but the specific action delivered on that promise so radically differed from its expected frame of reference and mode of fulfillment as to make it both unrecognizable and unacceptable. How to recognize Jesus and accept him as the fulfillment of God's plan first for Israel and then the world was a problem of critical importance.

Two factors contributed to the overall difficulty of developing a workable solution to this problem. First, the status of the Old Testament as a "Christian" source of understanding and truth for the church was

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 149–150.

⁵ All biblical translations are from the New International Version.

⁶ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 148.

questioned by such early theologians as Marcion (AD 84–160). Second, Gnostic writers delved into the still-developing Christian tradition and by borrowing vocabulary and imagery gave new, idiosyncratic, and even more unexpected meanings to familiar figures and concepts that, as a result, became vague, detached, and prone to “semantic breakdown.”⁷

This created something of an “inter-textual” conundrum: How to redefine the Old Testament prophecy creatively so that Jesus might be recognized and understood as its fulfillment without losing control of either the authority of the foundational context and its language or the language used to effect the transposition of the language of the Old Testament, and so fuse it to the new conceptual language necessitated by the nature of the unexpected realization of God’s plan in Jesus Christ. In addition, as hopes for the actual beginning of the end-time waned, there was the very real danger that, as the world continued, the early Christians would become disassociated not just from the historical era of Jesus but from his message and the language he used to convey that message. This was forestalled by the Gospels through the collocation of the oral tradition of the sayings of Jesus and their representation through the written word. This new representation itself involves a change in mode, and with this change in mode from the necessarily personal presentation of the spoken word to the equally necessary distanced re-presentation of the written word, the figure of Jesus is not simply saved from loss but his very authority is gathered, focused, and exercised by the mode itself.

The object was to transpose and transform while also exercising a control that delimited the dynamics of the process and defined its results. In thus opening the old to the new, the Evangelist had to avoid creating chaos on, first, the level of content and reference while attaching the conceptually new to the textual frame of reference provided by the Old Testament and the experiential frame of reference provided by the concrete world, and second, the level of the linguistic while using familiar words and terms in new ways without losing control of the process and creating unwanted sub-texts. The trick was to control the polysemous character of metaphor in general while redefining old metaphor and creating specific new metaphor to carry the meaning that

⁷ Ibid., 153.

would communicate the actuality of the specific and final revelation in space and time that is the Incarnation.

Anthony Thiselton reminds us that “language does indeed presuppose patterns, regularities, or ‘rules’ of a system, but unless a human being makes a judgment about their application (Wittgenstein’s *Anwendung*, cf. Saussure’s *parole*) within a context of inter-subjective life, then: ‘here the rules would really hang in the air; for the institution of their use (*Anwendung*) is lacking.’”⁸ He emphasizes that “rules about the interpretation of rules” (i.e., a hermeneutics) entail “a pattern of linguistic experience and critical judgment which can be called ‘training’ (*Arbrichtung*).”⁹ Thiselton’s insight into the fundamental metacritical function of language (based as it is upon his acute reading of both Wittgenstein and Gadamer) can, I would like to suggest, be applied directly to the Fourth Gospel. Doing so reveals immediately that one of the essential and narratively self-conscious (purposive) functions of this Gospel is to train its readers to interpret the story it tells according to a set of demanding and sophisticated rules that define the Gospel’s proper mode of meaning.

For this the most language conscious of the Gospels, the poetic modality of its prologue both provides a succinct mythopoetic exposition of the story and serves as the metaphorical core of the more prosaic narrative. The interpretive demands of the Fourth Gospel and the uncompromising call to faith are, I believe, unambiguously presented. The narrative itself is the necessary elaboration of this core, against which all insight woven into the meaning of the life of Jesus is to be tested. In other words, whether or not one learns to read John 1.1–5¹⁰ successfully is dependent upon whether and how well one works cooperatively with the aims of the Gospel as stated in verse 20:31 (which is now overwhelmingly accepted as its original conclusion): “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

⁸ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 128, quoting Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sects. 380, 86.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The two clauses of this statement offer, first, a choice and, second, a consequence to that choice. John states explicitly that he has textualized the story of Jesus so that the reader might voluntarily believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." In the usual sequence of a first reading, one has read the Gospel before coming to this verse. Here, instead of finding only the expected closure, the reader finds himself drawn into the start of a new process, a process of reflection and decision. The preferred outcome of the decision-making process is clearly given, but it is left up to the reader to determine the nature of his or her response to the story and to decide whether or not that response warrants a formal act of belief. This invitation serves to wake the reader up from the covert suavity—that is, morally persuasive—strategies of the narrative and its consequent emotional affects and demands a consciously considered response. As readers we are being asked to assent to the truth of a story which presents us with events that are beyond our observation on the testimony of the narrative itself. To believe or not to believe are the options offered.¹¹

The consequences and the responsibility of the positive option are clearly spelled out. If one's response to the story warrants belief then one obtains *life* and the joy that "is the proper fruit of faith,"¹² but only by the acceptance of the responsibility to maintain one's belief as an ongoing act of *believing*, a state of being the conditions of which have been described in the Gospel itself. The consequences of the negative option are left unstated but through implication are obvious enough. To choose unbelief is to choose death and concomitantly sorrow. Recognizing what is at stake, and whether predisposed to answer positively or negatively, the serious adult reader of the Gospel is likely to defer a decision and re-enter the narrative hoping to glean from it whatever is needed to make a more than emotional response to the offered invitation. Despite the difficulty of doing so, this means returning to and facing the narrative as honestly as is possible for the individual reader. It means opening oneself up to the narrative and allowing it to teach one how to read it, and this the Fourth Gospel begins to do at the outset.

¹¹ There is the additional unmentioned option of deferral. But this option is only temporary; no matter how many times exercised, it will always bring the reader back to the same point, the same moment of decision and, consequently, of action.

¹² John Fenton, *Finding the Way through John* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 74.

"...Of Thought and Life...": Learning to Understand

After establishing the rigorous interpretive demands supplied in the prologue, John begins to teach us how to read his gospel by presenting what, for our purposes, might best be termed *reader models*. The first of these, of course, is John the Baptist, who exemplifies the narrative's desired reader. He recognizes and interprets who and what Jesus is immediately: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (1:29b). This perceptiveness and open-hearted acceptance set the standard the Gospel requires of its readers.

But while the figure of John the Baptist tells us what the Gospel desires of us as readers, it does not teach us how to satisfy that desire. The task of teaching the necessary reading skills is given to other characters in the narrative, the first of which is Nicodemus. If John the Baptist is the model of the accomplished reader, whose skills are so internalized that he reads the text that is Jesus with his entire being and so can respond to that text with a confident and intuitive immediacy, then Nicodemus presents us with a negative reader model who approaches Jesus shrouded in the shadow of his own intellect.

Given Nicodemus's training as a Pharisee and his status on the ruling council, one would expect him to be accomplished at the interpretation of texts, but as he listens to Jesus he hears only what his own long practiced, denotatively oriented habit of thinking will allow him to hear. Jesus declares plainly that he is telling Nicodemus the truth when he says, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (3:3). But, however well schooled and sharply honed Nicodemus's mind may be, his ears are not attuned to the dramatic simplicity of Jesus's mode of expression. In contrast to John the Baptist, Nicodemus stumbles immediately over what he sees as a physical impossibility: "Surely [a man] cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (3:4b). His own preconception of what constitutes truth—the literal interpretation of material reality kept strictly separate from the divine—does not allow for a use of language that refuses to recognize, except as an illusion, any distinction between the mundane and the spiritual. Consequently, he cannot interpret and understand Jesus's words because he cannot recognize the logic that governs them. He listens to Jesus but does not *hear* him. Therefore, Jesus must expose to Nicodemus the limitations of his literalistic habit of thought and begin patiently to train him to hear and understand a mode of expression that contains within itself an awareness of the intimate intra-relationship between what

Nicodemus can only understand as two distinct and incommensurate levels of being. And just as Nicodemus is being taught how to hear, so are we. We participate in the schooling of Nicodemus—this curious, perhaps even intrepid teacher—and begin to learn to hear just, perhaps, as he does. What Ashton terms the two levels of understanding—the first being the “spiritual” and the second the “worldly”¹³—are brought together here (esp. in 3:16–21),¹⁴ and the inadequacy of an understanding dependent only on the latter is exposed. It must be admitted, however, that not only can Nicodemus *not* hear and understand this, but neither can the reader until all the reading lessons supplied by the Gospel are encountered and digested.

What we *can* understand, however, is that even as he teaches Nicodemus, Jesus makes a fundamental distinction between himself and the Pharisee: “You are Israel’s teacher . . . and you do not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony” (3:10–11). Who is the “we” Jesus refers to? And who are “you people”? For the naive reader it is enough, perhaps, that the distinction has been made. “We,” in this instance, could be understood as the adept and “you people” could be taken to refer to not only Nicodemus but to ourselves and all others like us who stand in need of the inner transformation needed to understand the truth we assume somehow lies hidden behind the metaphorical language of Jesus. But we could take a further step, and thereby align ourselves more closely with the implied readership (audience) of the narrative, by taking this opportunity to move more deeply into the socio-historical context of the Gospel. If we do this, Nicodemus himself becomes a communal symbol of all those within the synagogue and the wider culture of Israel who were attracted to Jesus only because of the miracles he performed and whose

¹³ Cf. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹⁴ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s only begotten Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

faith, consequently, was too shallow to allow them to recognize with John the Baptist that Jesus is the "Lamb of God." On one level, then, this distinction between "we" and "you people" reveals the antagonism between the "crypto-Christians" of the synagogue, like Nicodemus, and the Johannine community out of which John's Gospel arose and for which it speaks. This antagonism is again subtly revealed when Nicodemus, admittedly respectful of Jesus as a teacher, demonstrates his lack of faith in Jesus as the Son of God by supplying the one hundred litrai of spices he and Joseph of Arimathea use for the embalming of Jesus's body after the crucifixion (19:38–42). The implication is that, from the point of view of the Johannine community, Nicodemus was, however properly and respectfully, only preparing a corpse for entombment, not for resurrection.¹⁵

In addition to the significance gleaned from this socio-historical contextualization, we could also additionally interpret Nicodemus on another level as a trans-historical symbol. On this level, he is representative of all people who were and are so caught up in the substitutional life of the mundane that they are unable either to hear or to respond adequately to the call to authentic existence that is Jesus. This being so, they are unable to discern, much less accept, the "new gift that believers have received and that exalts them into a new consciousness and experience of existence"¹⁶ that is Eternal Life.

A third reader model is the one presented to us through the story of Jesus's healing of the man born blind. The central position of this episode, and that of the teaching of the Pharisees (10:1–21) which it precedes and to which it is situationally and thematically connected, signals its importance. For us, the most obvious approach to this reader model is in its contrast to the model presented through Nicodemus. Where the encounter with Nicodemus is based upon the trope of "hearing" (and through hearing, learning to understand what is communicated through a new mode of expression), the blind man's encounter with Jesus is based upon the trope of "seeing." Blind from birth, this man has no received or preconceived notions of what reality is "supposed" to look like. As this trope is designed, there is no body of knowledge present to come between the blind man and his understanding of his

¹⁵ David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989), 38–40.

¹⁶ Fenton, 71.

encounter with Jesus. He knows that he could not see before he encountered Jesus and that he could as a result of that encounter. Therefore, within the logic of the trope, he “knows” who and what Jesus is. He needs no secondary explanations, no further miracles, no interpretation or gloss upon the act or the identity of Jesus to help him understand. He can “read” his own experience, and he knows what he reads to be the truth. Of course, we can’t orient ourselves toward our encounter with Jesus (as mediated to us through the narrative) as if we were blind. But this is the direction in which we are being pointed. This is especially evident if we adapt one of Jesus’s characteristic metaphors of revelatory grammar to our own needs. While it is appropriate for Jesus to say “I am the light of the world” (9:5) before he heals the blind man, it is also appropriate for us in this situation to say, “I am the blind man.” If we could empty our minds of pre-conceived notions of what the truth is supposed to “look” like and, thus, encounter the narrative as newly sighted men (or as innocent children), we too would accept without question the truth we read there based upon the experience of our encounter. This is the lesson being taught to us as readers and the invitation offered us as human beings in our lives outside the narrative. Through the example of Jesus in word and action, the Evangelist provides practical experience at voluntarily transforming one’s self into whatever other person we may encounter in order to grasp his or her individuality directly. He also emphasizes the necessity of doing so if we are to obey Jesus and thus demonstrate our love for him.

Having culled this much from the story of Jesus’s healing of the blind man, we must ask ourselves how we might put this lesson into action. How might we as readers better align ourselves with, in this instance, the blind man? The first reflex—and the correct one—is to return to the beginning of the episode to re-read. We now notice that the disciples voice the assumption that the man’s blindness is the consequence of sin: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (9:2). Their interest in the blind man is only as an object lesson on the responsibility of sin. They have no interest in the man himself. Their question reveals their own reliance upon a received notion of the nature of sin that interprets physical infirmity, malformation, illness, even poverty, as manifestation of a divine judgment for failure to live correctly as defined by Mosaic Law that, in turn, results in a specific deserved punishment that can be inherited through generations. They are asking for a clarification on the causality of and responsibility for sin as they understand it.

On the one hand, the disciples are serving simply as a foil to Jesus and, once having served their function in the developing plot of this episode, they seemingly drop from sight. But their question has unlatched the gate to the enveloping theme of this pericope. Jesus walks through this new opening by first denying the causal relationship between physical disability and sin and then proceeds, through direct encounter with the blind man rather than abstract discussion about him, to initiate a sequence of events that, when finished, will have completely redefined the nature of sin itself for those who "have eyes to see."

Our recognition of this scene re-contextualizes the blind man as a socio-historical symbol, but it also places us next to him between the conflicting forces of the developing plot. From this perspective we can see that his "horizon," such as it is, overlaps but is not "justified" with that of the disciples. Having qualified his social status as that of a sinner, the disciples have accepted the blind man's marginalization as ontologically definitive. Jesus, however, does not. Where the disciples see only deserved existence beyond the threshold of society, Jesus sees a human being that has been ostracized by the cult of the synagogue, someone detached from its traditions and disaffected from its beliefs. In other words, Jesus sees an isolated individual who is ontologically in a liminal position fraught with primordial anxiety and, concomitantly, for whom the very nature of being is in question.

"...Do Words Have Meaning": The Living Word

To speak in broadly generalized Hegelian terminology, the Fourth Gospel is an example of the confrontation of antithetical phases of history that begins a dialectical process the outcome of which is a specific creative synthesis in human consciousness expressed as a unique message of revelation. This is why the contextualizing of the historicity of Jesus, his given-ness in the Gospel narrative, is so important. Jesus is the enactment, the revelation if you will, of the concurrence of diachronic, chronological time and the synchronic eternal moment.¹⁷ In this sense, it is the Gospel's narrative's communication of Jesus's example of loving obedience to the Father that creates and establishes through

¹⁷ Perhaps it is the recognition of the identity, or at least the simultaneity, of these two modes of duration that creates the modern concept of history.

language a “meeting place”¹⁸ with the modern reader and “serves to create faith, and in doing so...does not bypass the normal processes of understanding.”¹⁹

This brings us once more to the invitation to “believe that Jesus is the Christ.” Only now we are in position to accept that the narratively represented facticity of contrast between the being of Jesus and our own reveals that we are not at home in the world until we answer the call that uncovers God as the ground of all being. Having opened ourselves to the story, we have assisted it in transforming the way we live through language and, in doing so, assisted it also in the transformation of the mode through which we act and interact with the world, with others in the world, and with ourselves. Now we see that the Gospel does not so much demand a response from us as yearn for it. Now we can affirm with John that “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1.14). In this present moment, what the narrative has revealed is always and ever present, that living in the joy of God’s presence is being offered to us.

The metaphor of revelatory grammar used as an example above—“I am the light of the world”—is a case in point.²⁰ In this and other metaphors of the same explicit construction, Jesus declares himself in his human being not simply to possess a quality of the divine or a function of the Father, but to *be* that quality or function. He identifies himself with it, thus establishing what Ashton refers to as “identity-in-difference.”²¹ This trope expresses the fundamental paradox of the incarnation. The use of such grammar in John is profoundly proleptic, both anticipating and answering potential questions and objections, and as such accomplishes three things. First, its simplicity protects against the semantically innovative and idiosyncratic, i.e., against Gnostic or any other form of appropriation. Second, its stark openness veils it from recognition by those who cannot read in the same mode, i.e., when there is no equiva-

¹⁸ Ernst Fuchs quoted in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 93.

¹⁹ Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 94.

²⁰ Though any of the others would do just as well, i.e., 6:35—“I am the bread of life”; 6:51—“I am the living bread”; 8:12—“I am the light of the world”; 10:7—“I am the gate”; 10:11, 14—“I am the good shepherd”; 14:6—“I am the way and the truth and the life.”

²¹ Ashton, 409.

lence between mode of expression and mode of interpretation. Third, it provides immediate access to the truth it seeks to communicate to those who persevere in learning to read in its mode.

Taken together, these three anticipatory aspects of revelatory grammar establish a specific relationship between the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor that overarch all other values for either term by creating a boundary that delimits the polyvalence of both. This relationship both recognizes and utilizes the limited space and time available to the successful reader in whose life it is replicated by insisting upon the enactment of the defined values as a reciprocal expression of loving obedience to Jesus just as he is lovingly obedient to the will of his Father. In practical terms this observes and motivates the economics of the process of understanding. The equivalence of value between the "given" terms can only be understood as experienced through performance. This performance involves the utilization of the basic constituent elements of life itself, and as performance communicates itself to others who, should they respond, begin the process for themselves, thus perpetuating the enactment of the given relationship and its defining values. This revelatory grammar, especially as presented through the language of Jesus in particular, acts to replace all previous formulations of the human relationship with the divine and at least to inhibit if not prevent the generation of other languages—whether narrative, poetic, or discursive—that would seek to reinterpret its given values or limit its action in the lives of the human beings who act, in a sense, as both its symbiotic hosts and actants.

To assist in this process of training through language, the Gospel directly introduces new cultural presuppositions presented as theological assertions through the use of the oral formulaic or performative tag "I tell you the truth" or "Verily, verily, I say unto you." These assertions provide the point-of-view, the perspective from which the implied author tells the Gospel story. In the struggle to align ourselves successfully with this point-of-view we must open ourselves to the narrative's function as a connotative meta-language that seeks to control and direct the interpretative process. Once accepted, these new presuppositions become unconscious and constitute the pretext of the text and the ground of narrative reality for us as well as for the implied reader. It is through encounters such as these with and in the narrative that we begin, first, to modify our alignment in relation to the narrative according to the repeatedly manifested perspective of the implied author of the Gospel and, second, to adapt our position as the actual reader of

the Gospel to that of the implied reader as we successfully negotiate the lessons being taught by the narrative.

As we do this, we become aware of the teleological function of the story as "gospel." However dimly at first, we recognize that the Fourth Gospel is an account of the synthesis that resulted during the confrontation between two antithetical phases of history—that which existed before the Resurrection and that which came into being after—and that we are being drawn along one of the seams of that synthesis through a linguistic process of transformation. The Gospel, then, is not simply an account of that confrontation, but a still vital and effective agent of the process of synthesization. At the narrative level, the human Jesus is the figurative vehicle of this transformation and the focal point of the experiential revelation toward which the language of John's Gospel points. But, in a general sense, it is the *language* of the Gospel that is most at issue here. As T.F. Torrance has pointed out, the parables of Jesus illustrate the interaction between the word of God and methods of communication through concrete human language.²² It might be even more to the point to say that the epistemological significance of the language used to present those parables demonstrates that while the route to knowledge may lie along some esoteric Gnostic byway, the route to faith is through the dynamic power and transformational effect of this knowledge as experienced through the language used to re-present it.

Certainly, on the one hand, it is the presentation of Jesus as the unique, historical human being he was and not as a mythic demi-god or a supernatural being that makes him the crucial exemplar of the authentically human. His very being is a grammar of revelation. On the other hand, it is the semantics of the Gospel itself that serves the reader as the primary gateway to this new mode of perception and understanding of the truth Jesus embodies and expresses. One could say that the Fourth Gospel is the vehicle of revelation, but it would be more accurate to say that, in as much as it mediates between the reader and the Christ who is "the way and the life," this Gospel is the very *process* of revelation and as such is itself "the way," meaning the only way remaining, barring the mystical, to answer Jesus's invitation to "come" and "see" (1:39). On the personal level of individual experience then, when Hans-Georg Gadamer describes the hermeneutic relationship between the text and

²² Quoted in Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 91–92.

the interpreter as “a two way movement between the horizons of the text and those of the interpreter, in which the interpreter listens and is judged as well as judging,”²³ he is describing the fundamental hermeneutic of John. For, as Ashton observes, “The matter of the Gospel, its true content, is indistinguishable from its form.”²⁴

Conclusion

If C.H. Dodd is correct in saying that the realization of the Kingdom of God extends itself “over almost the whole field” of the Fourth Gospel while the expectation of a future consummation “has shrunk correspondingly,”²⁵ the question of what sense of expectation we possess as modern readers who approach the Gospel two thousand years later arises immediately. How are we to approach a narrative the ostensible goal of which²⁶ has been deferred for two millennia? Recognizing that, despite the best efforts of generations of scholars and theologians, there is no meaningful sense in which we can participate in the narrative, as did its original audience, how do we best gain access to it? Do we approach it as an object of study or of devotion? Both are traditional means of approach, but the danger to be guarded against here is the positivistic objectification of the narrative as text and/or as history on the one hand, and its religious hypostatization, i.e., its transformation into an object of worship, on the other. While the first generates data—mountains of it (and thus furthers the aim of a kind of understanding)—and while the second generates religious fervor, both deprive the Gospel of life by undervaluing its “story,” the communication of which, after all, is the goal of the Gospel narrative *qua* narrative and the primary reason behind its creation.

Why not approach the Fourth Gospel as we do all stories—as its audience, its readers, accepting the limitations and responsibilities that that entails—and in doing so place ourselves into relationship with it

²³ Ibid., 73.

²⁴ Ashton, 553.

²⁵ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 7.

²⁶ This is despite George B. Caird’s statement that Jesus and other biblical figures “regularly used end-of-the-world language metaphorically to refer to that which they well knew was not the end of the world.” As quoted in Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 476.

as living language that seeks first and foremost to communicate itself to us no matter what the distance of history or the difference of circumstances? Why not accept that lived human experience is the most important criterion of intelligibility for John's Gospel just as it is for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Waste Land*? Why not trust that all the Gospel has to tell us is represented by the text we have so carefully preserved and so assiduously studied for so long and that, barring physical or mental impairment or the willful determination to remain unreceptive, its import is, with effort, available to us? In more academic language, why not accept the position Wolfhart Pannenberg espoused when he wrote:

It is possible to find in the history of Jesus an answer to the question of how 'the whole' of reality and its meaning can be conceived without compromising the provisionality and historical relativity of all thought, as well as openness to the future on the part of the thinker who knows himself to be only on the way and not yet at the goal.²⁷

If we can trust both ourselves and the Gospel enough to make what Schleiermacher (*via* Ast) terms a "divinatory leap" into fresh understanding, we will discover that, just as does any of the "ordinary" literature we would thus leap into with anticipatory excitement and confidence, the Gospel itself will teach us how to read it and how best to participate in its meaning.²⁸

²⁷ Quoted in Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 84.

²⁸ Although not quoted from directly in this paper, the following works were consulted and are recommended as valuable further reading: David Mark Ball, *"I Am" in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Aim* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Gary A. Phillips, "The Ethics of Reading Deconstructively, or Speaking Face-to-Face: The Samaritan Woman Meets Derrida at the Well," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, eds. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 283–325; Mark W. Stibbe, "'Return to Sender': A Structuralist Approach to John's Gospel," in *The Interpretation of John*, 2nd ed., eds. John Ashton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 261–278; and Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scripture*, ed. with preface by James Breech (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

SOME ASPECTS OF NARRATION IN THE QUR'AN

Mustansir Mir

In Thomas Carlyle's—famous or notorious—judgment, the Qur'an, to quote only the gentler parts of that judgment, is "toilsome reading... [a] wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite" and has "unreadable masses of lumber."¹ Although the contemporary Western discourse on the Qur'an generally edits out Carlylean bluntness, the doubts and reservations so forcefully expressed by Carlyle about the language and narrative structure of the Qur'an continue to reverberate in literature on the Qur'an. Using milder language, Western writers now speak of the "disjointedness" or "disconnectedness" of the Qur'an.² But, considerations of courtesy or respect aside, Qur'anic narration admittedly poses serious problems for the average educated reader, Western or Muslim, who is likely to be puzzled by, for example, the sudden and frequent shifts of address and subject in the Qur'an. One's puzzlement is likely to increase if one approaches the Qur'an with a scholarly or literary background in a scripture like the Bible. The Bible, generally speaking, presents its material in chronological order, whereas the Qur'an, as a rule, lacks such historical sequence. To be sure, chronology is not the only conceivable organizing principle of texts, and a text like the Qur'an challenges one to search for clues that would explain or shed light on

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Teddington, Middlesex, U.K.: Echo Library 2007), 42–43. The book consists of a series of lectures delivered by Carlyle. The lecture from which the quote is taken is entitled "The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam"; it was given on 8 May 1840. It should be mentioned that Carlyle had genuine admiration for several aspects of the Qur'an—as he did for several aspects of Muhammad's life and work.

² See, for example, Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, completely revised and enlarged by W. Montgomery Watt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 22, 52, 73, 75. Elsewhere, I have tried to show that the charge of disconnectedness or disjointedness against the Qur'an is overstated, for, in a large number of cases—in many short, even medium-sized surahs (chapters) of the Qur'an, for example—the charge simply does not apply, since such Qur'anic units have an obvious coherence or continuity. See Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'an, the Word of God," in *Voices of Islam*, Vol. 1, *Voices of Tradition*, ed. Vincent Cornell (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 9–11.

the type of narration found in it.³ This paper is a modest attempt to respond to that challenge.⁴

The Living Context of the Qur'an

The Qur'an calls itself a book (2:2 *passim*), but that does not mean that the Qur'an can be read like a novel or that it has the neat and logical structure of a research work. The Qur'an's self-designation as a book is primarily meant to emphasize the authoritativeness of the Qur'anic prescriptions; indeed, the Arabic word for "book," *kitab*, is used in the Qur'an, in 98:3, for example—in the sense of "law."⁵ This is not to say that the Qur'an lacks all narrative structure. Many of the Qur'an's shorter surahs present few, if any, problems of coherence or structure.⁶ It is usually in the longer surahs that one encounters such problems. In dealing with such problems, it is well to remember that Qur'anic narration often mirrors real life. In real life, events do not follow an abstractly conceived logical sequence, and yet they have a logic of their own—the logic of the dynamic context in which they occur. The same is true of the sequence of verses found in many of the longer surahs of the Qur'an.

It will help to cast the Qur'an-persona as an orator delivering a message before an audience that includes believers, opponents, doubters, skeptics, and, not to be forgotten, the undecided. Unlike a writer, a speaker addresses a live audience. He engages one or more segments of his audience, not necessarily in a predictable order but in the order—sometimes in the apparent *lack* of order—generated by the exigencies of a fluid situation. His audience, being no passive listeners, might interrupt to seek clarification, ask questions, express reservations, raise objections, or even to heckle, and the speaker may have to pause

³ I have provided my own translation of the Qur'anic material cited in this paper. In references to the Qur'an, "Q" represents "Qur'an."

⁴ In making this response, I have relied heavily on a modern Urdu Qur'anic commentary, Pakistani scholar Amin Ahsan Islahi's *Tadabbur-i Qur'an*, 9 vols. (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 2000). This general acknowledgment, in lieu of detailed citation of volume and page in every single case, is not meant to diminish my indebtedness to Islahi.

⁵ The Arabic word for "book," *kitab*, is used in the Qur'an—in 98:3, for example—in the sense of "law" (cf. the Latin verb *scribere*, which is the common base of "scripture" and "prescription").

⁶ See n. 2, above.

to address the audience's concerns. Sometimes, he may address these concerns without stating them, as long as they are felt to be present in the air, so to speak, and he may switch from one topic to another, and to yet another, as long as the topics all belong to the dynamic situation of which he and his audience are a part. All of this forms what we may call the living context of the Qur'an, and it is in light of this living context rather than in that of any neat theoretical scheme that we should understand the narrative structure of the surahs, especially the longer surahs, of the Qur'an. An example from Surah 2, the longest surah in the Qur'an, will flesh out our statement about the Qur'an's living context.

Q 2:189–203 deals with several issues:

- verse 189 talks about the timings of the *hajj*, the annual ritual of pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca,⁷ and also abolishes a certain unwarranted pre-Islamic *hajj*-related practice;⁸
- verses 190–194 permit Muslims to fight during the period of the *hajj* and in the vicinity of the Ka'bah if they should come under attack during that period and in that locality;
- verse 195 exhorts Muslims to spend money in the way of God;
- verses 196–203 stress the need to perform the *hajj* and the *'umrah*, the lesser pilgrimage, with true devotion, and then lay down several injunctions—about animal sacrifice, about certain temporarily prohibited acts, about the correct performance of the pilgrimage rituals.

On the face of it, the verses of the passage are somewhat disjointed: How is the period of *hajj* connected to the idea of fighting during that period and near the Ka'bah? What accounts for the statement, next, about spending money in the way of God? And why are a series of injunction about the *hajj* laid down at this point?

⁷ The site of the annual Islamic pilgrimage, the Ka'bah is the prototypical mosque of Islam. According to ancient Arabian tradition, confirmed by Islam, the Ka'bah was built by Abraham, a major prophet in Islam.

⁸ After setting out for the *hajj*, the Arabs, if they had to visit their homes for some reason, and also on returning home after completing the *hajj*, came into their homes using a back entrance rather than by the front door, considering this an act of piety. Verse 189 says that such an act had nothing to do with piety, and that true piety consists in having fear of God in one's heart.

Surah 2 establishes Muslims as an independent religious community in Arabia. It then designates the Ka'bah as the Muslims' *qiblah*—the direction in which the ritual prayer is to be performed. The designation is a none-too-hidden signal that the Ka'bah, until now in the hands of the Quraysh, Mecca's ruling tribe, belongs to Muslims, the true heirs of the monotheist Abraham, who built the Ka'bah originally. Nor would such a Qur'anic designation persuade the Quraysh to relinquish control of the Ka'bah—custodianship of which had brought them prestige, power, and wealth—in favor of Muslims. In all likelihood, therefore, the issue of the Ka'bah's custodianship would have to be decided through war. One can already see the connection between *hajj* and war. Also, a Quraysh-Muslim war could always break out in the so-called Sacred Months, during which an Arabia-wide consensus had proscribed intertribal war in order to facilitate performance of *hajj* and *'umrah* by people from all over the peninsula. Muslims, too, felt obligated to honor the Sacred Months, but wished to know how to react in case war were imposed on them during those months and near the Ka'bah. Verses 190–194 permit Muslims to fight back in such a scenario. But a war has to be financed, and verse 195, therefore, urges Muslims to spend money in the way of God, a seemingly general appeal to spend money thus becoming a specific and contextually relevant appeal to fund war effort. Having dealt with the issue of a possible war over the Ka'bah's custodianship, the passage concludes with a description of some of the rituals of the pilgrimage (verses 196–203). A detailed commentary will bring out other aspects of the coherence of the passage, but the remarks made above will at least have shown that the several subjects taken up in the passages are interlinked through a living context.

To sum up: The living context of a Qur'anic text is the dynamic multifaceted background to which the elements of the text make explicit or implicit reference. An appreciation of the living context enables us to see, especially in longer Qur'anic surahs, coherence between the verses of a given passage of a surah—or even between the verses of the entire surah.

But how does one arrive at what we have called the dynamic multifaceted background? In principle, it is deducible from the text itself. To this end, one needs to make, using all the exegetical aids, an intensive study of a Qur'anic passage in relation to any surrounding text—ideally, in relation to the entire surah in which that passage occurs. Once established, the background acquires an independent identity

and serves both as an interpretive guidepost and as an interpretive criterion.⁹ The living context is to a text what a hub is to the spokes of a wheel. A hub exists independently of the spokes attached to it, but it serves as the matrix in which the spokes are set. Similarly, the living context exists independently of a text, but it serves as the framework in which that text is embedded and in reference to which that text is to be interpreted.

The Principle of Tasrif

The Arabic word *tasrif* means “change, alteration, variegation.” In the Qur'an, it is used to refer to the varied patterns of the movement of winds and clouds (2:164 and 45:5), and also to refer to the diverse ways in which the Divine message is presented in different places in the scripture (6:46, 65, 105; 7:58; 17:89; 18:54; 20:113; 46:27). In this second sense, the term *tasrif*, variegation, applies both to the content of the Qur'an and, more important for our purposes, to the manner in which that content is presented. Here we are concerned with *tasrif* as a mode of presenting material—that is, with *tasrif* as a narrative principle, which provides another important clue to understanding the organization of the Qur'anic text.

The Qur'anic principle of *tasrif* can be seen at work in the Qur'anic telling of stories—of prophets, for example.

Typically, the Qur'an tells the story of a major prophet not in one but in several places. It often breaks up a story into several portions, highlighting different portions in different places, varying the details, in subtle or pronounced ways, even when it repeats a particular portion of the story in its entirety or partially. The portion of a story related in a given place will be closely connected with the theme or subject being treated in that place. A brief look at the Qur'anic story of Adam¹⁰ will illustrate the Qur'an's use of *tasrif* as a narrative principle.

Three principal passages about Adam in the Qur'an are 2:30–39, 7:11–25, and 20:115–124:

⁹ In fact, the relationship between the background and the Qur'anic text in question is a dynamic one, both serving, through an ongoing critical interaction, to yield a more accurate understanding of the text.

¹⁰ Adam is a prophet in the Qur'an.

(a) Q 2:30–39 opens with God announcing to the angels that He plans to install a deputy (*khalifah*) on earth (the deputy, we learn from the passage, will be a member of the human race, a new species). The angels, alarmed, ask God whether He would create a species whose members, possessing discretionary powers as God's deputies, might commit mischief and shed blood. God creates Adam, who, at God's behest, informs the angels that the new species would not consist solely of miscreants, but will also include many good and noble people—the implication being that the angels' apprehension is due to their ignorance of the larger picture.¹¹ God commands the angels to bow down before Adam, and all of them, with the exception of Iblis, or Satan, comply.¹² God places Adam and his mate, Eve,¹³ in the Garden of Eden, where, seduced by Satan, the couple eats of a forbidden tree. God commands Adam and Eve, on the one hand, and Satan, on the other, to descend to earth. God forgives Adam (Eve, too, the context suggests) for his lapse, but the Divine command to descend to earth remains in force, and Adam and Eve are told that those human beings who accept Divine guidance when it reaches them will enter paradise, whereas those who reject that guidance will enter hellfire.

This version of the Adam story occurs in the context of the different responses made by Muhammad's addressees to his claims of prophecy. A small number of people believed in Muhammad, but many, while conceding in their hearts that a truthful individual like Muhammad could not have made a false claim to prophecy, opposed him on account of certain vested interests they wished to protect. Yet others were undecided, for they wished to learn more about Muhammad and the Qur'an before reaching a decision. In Q 2:30–39, the undecided among Muhammad's addressees are compared to the angels who seek clarification upon learning that God intends to install a deputy on earth.¹⁴ To

¹¹ This interpretation of the Qur'anic passage is taken from Islahi, 1:156–163. For an explanation of the passage, see Mustansir Mir, *Understanding the Islamic Scripture: A Study of Selected Passages from the Qur'an* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 21–23.

¹² Iblis, as Q 18:50 specifies, was not an angel. Verse 34 of the passage under study seems to suggest that Iblis, too, was an angel, but this verse can be interpreted, in light of Q 18:50, to mean that Iblis was a *jinni*, not an angel. See Mir, *Understanding the Islamic Scripture*, 23.

¹³ Eve is not named in the Qur'an, but, following the Bible, we can use that name for Adam's mate.

¹⁴ Note the subtle comparison made in the Qur'anic text between the installation of Adam as God's deputy and the installation of Muhammad as prophet.

these undecided people, the Qur'an later provided the clarification they wanted, just as, in the passage under study, the angels are furnished with the information that would enable them to recognize Adam's true status. In the passage, likewise, those who opposed or rejected Muhammad, not on legitimate or plausible grounds but out of perverse arrogance, are compared to Iblis, who refused to bow down before Adam. Verses 30–39 of Surah 2, thus, offer a dramatic representation of the responses made to Muhammad's prophetic claims staked out in verses 1–29.¹⁵

(b) Q 7:11–25 opens with God commanding the angels to bow down before Adam. All, except Iblis, obey the command. God asks Iblis about the reason for his disobedience, and he replies that, being made of fire, he is superior to Adam, a creature of earth. Commanded to leave paradise, Iblis requests, and receives, God's permission to try to mislead Adam's progeny. Iblis vows to lead most of the human beings into error, and God says that He will cast all of Iblis's followers into hellfire. God lodges Adam and Eve to reside in paradise, forbidding them to approach a certain tree. Satan insinuates to Adam and Eve that the prohibition is intended to prevent them from becoming angels or achieving immortality. Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree and, as a consequence, lose their celestial robes, and seek to cover their nakedness with the leaves of paradise. Reprimanded by God, Adam and Eve admit their mistake, seek forgiveness of God and, the context suggests, are forgiven by Him. God commands the couple, on the one hand, and Satan, on the other, to descend to earth, which will serve as their base until their death.

A highly strategic use of the second person plural pronoun in verse 11 suggests that the passage should be interpreted in reference to the Quraysh, the oligarchs of Mecca to whom Surah 7 is addressed. Verse 11 reads: "And We created *you*, then We gave *you* form, and then We said to the angels, 'Bow down to Adam!' The angels bowed down, with the exception of Iblis; he did not join those who bowed down." The

¹⁵ Q 2:30–39, which we have seen to be continuous in theme with verses 1–29 of the surah, is also continuous with the verses following the passage. Muhammad's prophetic message in Arabia was aimed, on the one hand, at the idolatrous Arabs (*mushrikun*), especially the Quraysh of Mecca, and, on the other, at the Jews and Christians, who lived in various parts of Arabia. With verse 40 of the surah begins another section which continues at least until verse 123. The Jews are the addressees in this section (the Christians are addressed in the next surah). The theme of Muhammad's prophecy, thus, links up verses 30–39 with verses 40–123, just as it links up verses 30–39 with verses 1–29.

referent of the two italicized pronouns is the Quraysh. In saying that God created the Quraysh, then gave form to the Quraysh, and then said to the angels, "Bow down to Adam!," the verse is saying that the story of Adam is not the story of one man, but that of the entire human race, including, of course, that of the Quraysh. The story of Adam about to be told in the passage, is, therefore, directly relevant to the Quraysh. A review of the surah's first ten verses will put the passage in context.

In verses 1–10, the Quraysh are instructed to believe in Muhammad (verse 3), and are warned that, by persisting in their rejection of Muhammad, they are, like many previous nations, setting themselves up for Divine punishment, which could overtake them anytime (verse 4). Verse 10 accuses the Quraysh of showing ingratitude to God, to whom they owe their extraordinary power and affluence. The similarities between the Adam story (Q 7:11–25) and the Quraysh (the referent in the surah's first ten verses) can now be identified: The arrogant Quraysh are today rejecting Muhammad just as an arrogant Iblis once refused to bow down before Adam (verses 12–13). Also, in the case of the Quraysh at least, Iblis has fulfilled his vow of misleading human beings (verses 16–17). Verse 22, which speaks of Satan causing Adam and Eve to lose their celestial robes, alludes to a certain pre-Islamic practice during the pilgrimage: circumambulation of the Ka'bah in a state of nakedness. The Arabs believed that dress was an adornment that went ill with the asceticism required in the worship at the Ka'bah. The Quraysh were responsible for popularizing the notion. While they themselves did not take off their clothes during the circumambulation of the Ka'bah, they required the non-Meccan pilgrims to perform the ritual either naked or wearing clothes borrowed from them.¹⁶ Finally, while Q 2:20–39 was notable for the contrast it made between the attitudes of the angels and Satan (the two representing, respectively, the positive and negative responses to Muhammad's call), Q 7:11–25 is notable for the challenge of Satan to God and for the reference to the pre-Islamic Arab practice of circumambulating the Ka'bah in a state of nakedness. We can now see that Qur'an 7:11–25, though it overlaps Qur'an 2:30–39 in content, has a thrust quite different than the latter's, and that the two passages, in spite of their striking resemblance to each

¹⁶ Islahi, 3:248.

other in terms of substance and language, are not interchangeable, since each belongs to a different context.¹⁷

(c) Q 20:115–124 opens by citing Adam's failure to fulfill the responsibility with which God had charged him. Obeying God, the angels, with the exception of Iblis, bow down before Adam. God places Adam and Eve in the blissful Garden of Eden, warning him against their enemy Satan's attempt to expel them from it. Satan insinuates to Adam and Eve that eating of a certain tree will make them immortal and confer eternal kingdom upon them. Upon eating of the tree, the private parts of Adam and his mate become exposed and the two begin to stitch leaves of paradise onto themselves. But God forgives Adam (again, we can safely assume, Eve, too) and guides him, commanding him and his mate, on the one hand, and Satan, on the other, to descend to earth as enemies. God says that He will bless the progeny of Adam and Eve if they follow, but will punish them if they reject, the guidance they receive from Him.

Q 20:115–124 comes immediately after Muhammad has been instructed, in verse 114, not to "precipitate" Qur'anic revelation but to wait patiently for it, since the Qur'an is being revealed in accordance with a certain Divine plan. Verse 114 reads: "And do not be hasty with the Qur'an before its revelation to you is completed [in due course]. Do say, though, 'My Lord, increase me in wisdom!'" To Muhammad, who preached in a hostile environment and faced attacks and criticisms from several quarters, the Qur'an was the sole source of knowledge, guidance, comfort, and consolation, and, naturally, he waited eagerly, even impatiently, to receive revelations. It is this over-eagerness, or haste, against which Q 20:115–124 warns Muhammad. Just as, in the case of Q 7:11–25, a strategic use of the second person plural pronoun (verse 11) suggested that the Adam story told in that passage be interpreted in reference to the Quraysh, so, in the opening verse of Q 20:115–124, the use of the expression "at an earlier time" (Arabic: *min qablu*) suggests that the Adam story told in this surah be interpreted in reference to the situation of Muhammad, described in verse 114. Verse 115 reads: "And, at an earlier time, We charged Adam with a responsibility, but he forgot, and We did not find any resolve

¹⁷ Just as Q 7:11–25 is connected in theme with the first ten verses of the surah, so it is connected with the verses that follow it. For example, verses 26–28 and 31–33 of the surah have, as their background, the same subject of circumambulating the Ka'bah in a state of nakedness that verses 20–22 in our passage have dealt with.

in him.” Thus, Q 20:115–124 is saying, in context, that Muhammad must be patient—he must be content to receive, at one time, only as much of the Qur’an as determined by Divine wisdom, for, in the past, Adam suffered as a result of haste on his part: while in the Garden of Eden, his impatience made him succumb to Satan’s machinations. Adam’s overeagerness should, therefore, be a lesson to Muhammad. Incidentally, another passage in Surah 20 makes the same point, this time in reference to Moses. Moses was commanded by God to arrive at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. But Moses, too, showed haste, reaching Mount Sinai before the appointed time. When asked by God about the reason for his hasty arrival, Moses replied that he had wished to please God. But God informed Moses that, in his absence, a certain Samaritan had misled his people by crafting a golden calf, which the Israelites had taken as an object of worship. The moral of Q 20:115–124, therefore, is that haste would not suit Muhammad, just as, at an earlier time, it did not suit Adam (and, at a later date, Moses).

The principle of *tasrif* helps us to see that a Qur’anic text, occurring with variations in different places, comes to have, besides its general meaning, a more determinate, context-specific meaning. Thus, the same portion of the Adam story, related in different places, seems to have a different thrust in each place: The Adam story in Q 7:11–25 constitutes a comment on the Quraysh, whereas the Adam story in Q 20:115–124 refers to a certain situation in which Muhammad found himself. It goes without saying that, in order to understand, in its entirety, any Qur’anic story to which the principle of *tasrif* is applicable, we must piece together all the versions of the story occurring in the Qur’an. In interpreting a Qur’anic story’s overall meaning and significance, the principle of *tasrif* would require us to collate and synthesize what we have called the more determinate and context-specific thrusts of the different versions of the story.

A study of the feature of *tasrif* in the Qur’an illustrates an established principle of Qur’anic exegesis, namely, “One part of the Qur’an explains another.” Q 2:30–39 says that Satan tricked Adam and Eve into eating of the forbidden tree (verse 36). Q 7:11–25 explains in detail how Satan executed his plan to deceive the pair (verses 20–22). A close study of *tasrif* is likely to produce, in the case of a given Qur’anic text, a dimension of meaning that otherwise might remain unnoticed in the individual versions of that text. According to Q 2:30–39 (see verse 36) and Q 20:115–124 (see verse 123), it is Adam and Eve, on the one hand, and Satan, on the other, who are enemies to each other. But while

Q 7:11–25 (see verse 24) also makes the same point, we learn from other verses of this passage (verses 16–17) that Satan regards God, and not man, as his true rival, and that Satan's plans to mislead human beings are only his way of taking revenge against God. For it was God who created Adam, raised him to the high status of God's deputy, and commanded other orders of creation, including the *jinn*, to which order of creation Satan himself belonged, to bow down before Adam.

Association

In the next to last stanza of his "Ode to A Nightingale," John Keats, referring to the nightingale's song, says:

...the same that oft times hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

And the last stanza of the poem begins with these lines:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!¹⁸

The word "forlorn," coming at the end of one stanza, leads Keats, by association of thought, to compose the next stanza. This appears to be a simple verbal connection, but is, in fact, more than that, for these two stanzas of Keats' poem are also bound together at a deeper level by the mood of sadness and wistfulness that permeates the entire poem. Of this type of connection, or association, there are many instances in the Qur'an. Perhaps a good way of explaining the significance of the principle of association in the Qur'anic narrative is by observing the principle at work. Q 26:69–104 will serve as our text for this purpose:

⁶⁹And relate to them the story of Abraham. ⁷⁰When he said to his father and his people, "What is it that you worship?" ⁷¹They said, "We worship idols, and we will continue to be their devotees." ⁷²He said, "Do they hear you when you call them? ⁷³Or benefit you or harm you?" ⁷⁴They said, "Rather, we found our forefathers doing the exact same thing." ⁷⁵He said, "Did you ever consider what you have been worshipping, ⁷⁶you and your forefathers?" ⁷⁷For they [idols] are my enemy. But not so the Lord of the worlds—⁷⁸the one who created me, and so guides me;

¹⁸ Keats: *Poetical Works*, ed. H.W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 209.

⁷⁹and the one who gives me to eat and drink; ⁸⁰and when I fall ill, He it is who makes me well; ⁸¹and the one who will cause me to die and then bring me to life; ⁸²and the one who, I hope, will forgive me my sins on the Day of Recompense. ⁸³My Lord, give me the power of decision, and make me join the ranks of the pious. ⁸⁴Give me a good name among posterity, ⁸⁵and include me among the inheritors of the paradise of bliss. ⁸⁶Forgive my father; he was indeed one of the misguided. ⁸⁷And do not disgrace me on the day people will be raised up—⁸⁸the day neither wealth nor children will be of any avail. ⁸⁹The only exception [= the only ones to succeed on that day] will be those who come to God bearing a sound heart. ⁹⁰And paradise will be brought close to the God-fearing; ⁹¹and hell will be exposed for the misguided. ⁹²And it will be said to them, “Where are those you have been worshipping other than God?” ⁹³Will they help you or defend themselves?” ⁹⁴And then they [idols] will be tossed into it [hell] head down, they and the misguided, ⁹⁵and the armies of Iblis, all of them. ⁹⁶They will say—as they bicker in it—⁹⁷“By God, we surely were in plain error” ⁹⁸when we declared you to be equal to the Lord of the worlds. ⁹⁹The evildoers alone are the ones who have misguided us. ¹⁰⁰We have neither interceders ¹⁰¹nor any intimate friend. ¹⁰²If only we had another chance to return, that we might become believers!” ¹⁰³In all this there is a sign—but most of them are not going to become believers. ¹⁰⁴And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty, the Very Merciful.

The story of Abraham told in this passage occurs in a series of prophet stories related in Surah 26. Most of those stories have a similar format, and the relationship of Q 26:69–104 with the preceding and following passages raises no special difficulties, allowing us to focus on the way, or ways, in which the verses of this passage are interconnected. The passage is held together by the use of several techniques of association which a superficial reading of the passage is likely to miss.

The passage, though it opens with a reference to an event in ancient history (Abraham and his people) and goes on to describe an eschatological happening (Divine judgment in the afterlife), flows smoothly and appears to be a single, seamless unit of description. Actually, it is composed of several smaller units, and it acquires its unity from the way, or ways, in which those units are linked up. After an introductory verse (verse 69), an exchange between Abraham and his people is reported in verses 70–82. Between verses 70–77 and verses 78–82, however, occurs a subtle break, signaled by the words “But not so” in verse 77.¹⁹ Verses

¹⁹ The Arabic text uses the exceptive particle *illa*, which, being disjunctive here, is best translated here by means of an expression like “But not so” instead of by a word like “except.”

70–77 contain Abraham's criticism of the deities of his people, whereas verses 78–82 describe the God that Abraham believes in (Abraham's God, "the Lord of the universe," is already mentioned at the end of verse 77); it is as though criticism of his people's deities has given Abraham the opportunity to explain his own belief. Here we have, then, the use of the associational technique called juxtaposition.

Verses 78–82 end with a reference to resurrection (the power to resurrect being one of the attributes of Abraham's God) and (once resurrection is mentioned) with an expression of hope on Abraham's part that God may forgive him when He resurrects and judges human beings. With Judgment Day mentioned, Abraham prays, in the next four verses (83–87) to be included among the pious and among the "inheritors" of paradise, these four verses forming a logical adjunct to the preceding verses. As in the last verse of the preceding unit (verse 82), so in the last verse of this unit (verse 87) occurs the word *yawma* ("on the day when"), referring to Judgment Day. A description of that day is provided next—in verses 88–91, which also begin with the word *yawma*. Another linking technique has been used in these verses—implication (*tadmin*). In one form of implicative construction, a statement made by one speaker is extended by another speaker, but in such a way as to leave the flow of the discourse uninterrupted. Such an imperceptible change of speakers takes place in the present passage. Until verse 87, the speaker is Abraham, who concludes his speech with the words, "and do not disgrace me on the day (*yawma*) people will be raised up." Beginning with verse 88, God takes over as speaker, repeating Abraham's *yawma* and laying down the rules of judgment on the Last Day: "the day neither wealth nor children will be of any avail...." Paradise and hell having been mentioned (in verses 90 and 91), the next set of verses, 92–102, reports that the people of hell will, reproached by God, confess their guilt, but will receive no help from any quarter. This set of verses exemplifies the use of yet another technique of association: shift from narration to dialogue. While verses 88–91 describe Divine judgment on the Last Day, verses 92–102 report, in dramatic form, one or two dialogues that will take place on that day.²⁰ The last two verses in the passage, 103–104, constitute a comment, suggesting the perspective

²⁰ The dialogues are one-sided, but presumably only because it is not necessary to report them here in detail; elsewhere in the Qur'an the same dialogues occur as proper, two-sided conversations.

one ought to place on the present passage. The perspective is no doubt religious, but, from the literary standpoint, it is not obtrusive. Commenting on the story of the ark in 1 Samuel, Robert Alter remarks: "The general purpose of the story is pointedly ideological."²¹

In association, we deal with a text that possesses inner integrity. But that integrity, while genuine in its own right, is seen, upon analysis, to have resulted from an interweaving of diverse ideas, facts, or events. The three techniques of association that we noted—juxtaposition, implication, and narration-to-dialogue shift—are used frequently in the Qur'an, and understanding their form and function will help to elucidate certain aspects of Qur'anic narration.

A final note: This chapter will have suggested—correctly, I believe, somewhat disconcertingly, I admit—that, in terms of narration, the Qur'anic text is so different from most other texts familiar to us that (even assuming that we can study the Qur'an in its original language, Arabic) very little of our experience gained from a study of other texts prepares us adequately to handle the Qur'anic text. But this is no cause for despair. It only means that the subject of Qur'anic narration is a field wide open to exploration.

²¹ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 102.

DEATH AND THE DOUBLE:
GOTHIC AESTHETICS IN GENESIS 4.1–16

Andrew Hock Soon Ng

With the sophisticated critical work that surrounds Gothic studies today, the Gothic can no longer be considered as merely a “type” of writing which deals with the ghosts, castles and madmen. The Gothic has become a mode of artistic expression, what Anne Williams terms “an art of darkness” and what this essay would call an aesthetic. It is a discourse that enables the articulation of what is otherwise unutterable, providing the textual space for epistemologically and ontologically problematic figurations—be it physical or psychical—to make their presence heard, and in the process, vex the dominant discourses that seek to repress them. As Fred Botting tells us, the Gothic, among other things, is about transgression; which is why moments of crisis which disrupt the subject’s stability and confront his symbolic interpellation with a gaping void (most familiarly conceptualised as the sublime) are especially prominent.¹ The Gothic is also about liminal positions, a discourse of the threshold in which all hopes for coherence is rendered impossible. Gothic monsters—the vampire, Frankenstein’s monster, the double—are all liminal figures straddling between the human and the non-human. They are threatening not only in themselves, but *because* they remind us of our duality and the ease with which we can slip into otherness.

As an aesthetics, the Gothic benefits from the perspicacity of various theoretical trends including Marxism, and especially feminism and psychoanalysis, to unearth its deep structures, and to intensify an appreciation for its dark poetics. This has purportedly been attempted in biblical studies, although “the Gothic” is not overtly invoked. One narrative from the Tanakh that has been critically explored from an implicitly Gothic standpoint is the tale of the Levite and his Concubine in Judges 19. Phyllis Tribble calls it a “text of terror”, and Mieke Bal has performed several perceptive interrogations of the story that

¹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 6–13.

is reminiscent of Gothic criticism.² This is not unsurprising in view of the fact that Judges 19 contains many inferences of textual burial and cannibalistic metaphors, culminating in a profound act of literal rape and bodily dismemberment of the concubine. Yet the Tanakh contains many other tales which could profitably be read as Gothic, and this essay proposes a reading of a specific narrative—the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4.1–16) from precisely such a critical angle.³

Especially useful in the following discussion is the Gothic double which will serve as the guiding trope to interrogate the dialectics of sibling rivalry that potentially points to a theologically configuration of the universally divided self. Further drawing from the theory of sacrifice conceptualised by René Girard (and refined by Joel Black), it will be argued that Cain's act of murder irrevocably results in his *becoming* his brother (here, Cain's denial that he is his brother's keeper is suggestive). In this sense, Cain *literally* hosts Abel within himself, a condition which vitally suggests the Gothic double.

The story Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) continues to baffle theologians and literary critics alike for its various textual aporias. Cheryl Fresch, for example, calls it a murder mystery because it poses “questions and uncertainties” that are also the “traditional concerns of the literary mystery” such as the unidentified murder weapon, the victim's culpability, and the criminal's motive.⁴ The narrative is also a “theological mystery” with regards to God's role in the murder and “the human drama of brother against brother”.⁵ These ambiguities provide a useful opening for my reading of this narrative from a Gothic perspective. Primarily, this essay is interested in Abel's murder, and to tease out the story's possible theological contention, a reading of Genesis 4.1–16 against the trope of the Gothic double will be performed. It will be demonstrated that Cain and Abel are Gothic doubles that function as a theological metaphor for the self/other dialectic.⁶ The stasis that Cain (a farmer)

² Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1984); Bal, Mieke, “Body Politic”, in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, eds. D. Jobling, T. Pippin and R. Schliefer (London: Blackwell, 2001), 142–58 and “Dealing/With/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges”, in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. A. Bach (New York/London: Routledge, 1999), 317–34.

³ All biblical references are to the New International Version.

⁴ Cheryl H. Fresch, “‘Cain rose up against Abel’: Murder, Mystery, and *Paradise Lost*”, *Christianity and Literature* 51.2 (2002), 191.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John Herdman insightfully demonstrates the theological history of the double. In his book, *The Double in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1990),

signifies is juxtaposed against the shepherd's mobility, and Cain's curse is precisely an endless wandering that he must now perform as expiation for his crime. In this sense, the murder results in Cain *becoming* his brother, hence suggesting the double motif. It must be emphasised that this reading of the double in Genesis 4 diverges considerably from the traditional Gothic one. In the latter, the double is almost always inherent in the host subject—the so-called “repressed other”, or “an imaginary other”—who then “returns” to vex the subject's sense of coherence to the point of dissolving both host and double.⁷ In Linda Dryden's view, the “double is a threat to the integrity of the self, and frequently evidence of a Gothic, supernatural force at large that brings with it death and destruction. Tales of doubling are, more often than not, tales about paradigms of good and evil”.⁸ An obvious example would be Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), but even in narratives like Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of the Justified Sinner* (1824) and Poe's “William Wilson” (1839), in which the double is represented as a differentiated figuration, it remains ambiguous, rendering such texts fantastic (in Todorov's sense). In Genesis 4 however, the two brothers are clearly distinct individuals whose singularity will only become (at least in this reading) apparent in the course of the narrative. Their “merging” culminates in the act of murder which simultaneously results in identification and substitution.

In the story, that Cain “worked the soil” and Abel “kept flock” (v. 2) initially situate the brothers as diametrical opposites in terms of their spatial and occupational identification. But there is, at the same time, already an implied dialectical relationship.⁹ The two brothers are always mentioned in relation to each other (up to the point of the murder) almost as if the text is insisting on a single (theological) significance that both brothers will eventually reveal. That is, Cain and Abel are fundamentally textual doubles who serve as each other's foil in order

Herdman argues that “dualities in Christian theology” such as the dialectics of spirit/flesh, body/soul, good/evil and God/devil serve as fundamental prototypes of the religious double that subsequently found its way into religious and literary discourses (4–10).

⁷ Andrew J. Webber, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 54.

⁸ Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave, 2003), 38.

⁹ Here, Andrew Webber's argument that in stories about the double, the divided subject is usually split dialectically rather than diametrically (6), is useful.

to make a theological point. This implies, on the one hand, that Cain's function as murderer necessitates Abel's victimhood: the narrative requires a non-provocative victim in order to stress the heinousness of the perpetrator's aggression and crime. Cain's "evil", as it were, can only be made absolute in view of his victim's total innocence.¹⁰ This is the diametrical opposite that carries from the brothers' occupational difference. On the other hand, the use of direct and near parallel structures to describe the brothers (v. 1–5, v. 8) suggests a dialectical relationship that is stylistically rendered: "[Eve] *gave birth to Cain*.... Later she *gave birth to his brother Abel*" (v. 1, 2); "Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil" (v. 2); "...Cain *brought* some of the fruits.... But Abel *brought* fat portions..." (v. 3, 4), "The Lord *looked with favour on Abel and his offering*, but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favour" (v. 4, 5, chiasmus); "Now Cain said to his brother, Abel, 'Let's go out to the field'. And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel..." (v. 8, these two phrases can be read as mirror structures, with "the field" serving as the focal point of reflection) (emphases mine). What is interesting about parallel structures are simultaneously their similarity and difference that retain a semblance of difference/similarity. In this sense, parallel structures are semantic doubles, and their predominance in the first half of Genesis 4 informs this reading of Cain and Abel as signifying (from a theological viewpoint) a single representation that is split.¹¹

Arguably, the narrative's stylistic suggestion that Cain and Abel are potentially each other's double becomes apparent in verse 8, when Cain murders Abel. Murder dissolves the differences between killer and

¹⁰ Two major problems with interpreting Genesis 4 are the lack of information about Cain's sin that leads to his offering being rejected by God, and the reason behind his murder of Abel. Both these issues cannot be discussed here as they are not the primary concerns in this essay. For useful readings, see H.B. Huffmon, "Cain: The Arrogant Sufferer", in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry*, eds. A. Kort and S. Morshauser (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 109–13; James L. Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fables: Genesis 4.1–16", in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. R. Brooks and J.J. Collins (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 176–9; Angela Y. Kim, "Cain and Abel in the Light of Envy: A Study in the History of the Interpretation of Envy in Genesis 4.1–16", *JSP* 12.1 (2001), 65–84; and Pamela T. Reis, "What Cain Said: A Note on Genesis 4.8", *JSOT* 27.1 (2002), 107–13.

¹¹ As the emphasis of this essay is a literary one, a theological reading of Genesis 4 that is derivable from a Gothic interpretation will not be emphasised, although a tentative suggestion as to how the story provokes a theological point will be provided towards the end of the analysis.

victim in an “intimate” act of transgression. René Girard, who reads the Cain and Abel myth from an anthropological standpoint, suggests that this story lays the foundational taboo against human sacrifice.¹² For, if allowed, the possibility of establishing epistemological and axiological surety, upon which social order is to be based, will be jeopardised. Girard does not attempt to explain Cain’s motive but concentrates instead on the transgressive act itself. Murder intimately binds the killer and his victim in a powerful dialectic that blocks subjective formation. In an act of murder, the killer transgresses into the boundary of the victim, thus “taking over” as it were, and in the process, loses his sense of differentiated spatiality and identity. Having been “taken over”, the victim is now metaphorically “lodged” within his killer. Especially for the murderer, who is now also host to his victim/double, he can no longer form a coherent subjectivity, his psyche having been fundamentally split in the act of homicide. In literature, the unspeakable “act of murder”, according to Joel Black, “appear[s] more profound than the work of art that merely describes it”.¹³ He goes on to assert that “pure murder is a thoroughly unmotivated, disinterested act, a supreme fiction that is only possible in the realm of art, and that sets off by contrast all the impurities and contradictions associated with human existence”.¹⁴ Black’s point can be usefully appropriated to read Genesis 4. What is startling about this narrative is the fundamentally inexplicable act by Cain which no amount of theological exegesis can account. It is what renders Cain’s crime both absolute and sublime: “an event is sublime when its cause is hidden”.¹⁵ More importantly, this sublime moment also constitutes the “non-reciprocal point” which will blur the two brothers’ distinction altogether.¹⁶ By murdering Abel, Cain experiences what Black terms “the phenomenon of ‘dissolution’—the submersion of separate subjectivity into unbroken continuity”.¹⁷ At the moment of fatal contact, the killer and the killed share a “carnal knowledge” that is “a communion at the instant of death between bodies that are no

¹² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), 4.

¹³ Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ Girard, 159.

¹⁷ Black, 108.

longer distinct from each other”.¹⁸ Both killer and victim dissolve into each other, becoming two selves in one.

When God questions Cain as to Abel’s whereabouts after the murder, Cain famously answers, “I don’t know . . . Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9). In light of the argument thus far, Cain’s reply is ironic because, in murdering his brother, he has *indeed* become his brother’s keeper: *he is now host to his murdered double*. God’s pronouncement of his curse brings into relief the perpetual “keeping” he must now perform to atone for his transgression. By being cast out as “a restless wanderer on the earth” (v. 12, 13), Cain now assumes Abel’s peripatetic lifestyle as a shepherd, which indirectly means he must now *be* his brother for an indefinite period of time (for part of Cain’s curse is also a remarkably prolonged life). As a restless wanderer, Cain’s curse is precisely to perpetually replay Abel’s return *within himself*. Webber suggests that one of the premises of the motif of the double “is that of return and repetition”.¹⁹ God’s curse on Cain indemnifies this. Interestingly, an insight from Girard into the relationship between antagonism and violence summarises the story of Cain and Abel from a theoretical angle:

As I have said, the differences that seems to separate the antagonists shift ever faster and more abruptly as the crisis grows in intensity. Beyond a certain point the non-reciprocal moments succeed each other with such speed that their actual passage becomes blurred. They seem to overlap, forming a composite image in which all the previous “highs” and “lows”, the extremes that had previously stood out in bold relief, now seem to intersect and mingle. Where formerly he had seen his antagonist and himself as incarnations of unique and separate moments in the temporal scheme of things, the subject now perceives two simultaneous projections of the entire time span—an effect that is almost cinematographic.²⁰

Read against this view, several important points can be derived. It has been demonstrated that on a textual level, Cain’s and Abel’s diametrical opposition is bridged stylistically as their antagonism grows. The “non-reciprocal moment” that blurs the distinction between the two brother is the act of murder, after which both selves become collapse into one (Cain’s) body by a curse that necessitates its perpetual hosting (or keeping) of the double (Abel). Also, Girard’s “highs” and “lows” correspond

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹ Webber, 4.

²⁰ Girard, 159–160.

to Ulrich Simon's reading of the myth when he observes that "possibly Abel does symbolise the higher self, the spiritual (airy) nature of mankind, and Cain the thrusting materialism [therefore "lower"] of metals and armaments (acquisition, trade)".²¹ After the murder, Cain—to make a tentative theological point to the tale—now embodies the dual nature of humanity whose striving for higher spirituality is constantly thwarted by the baseness of the carnal self. The expansiveness of Girard's double, read in this theological light, is considerable. Cain is the Gothic villain in this story, whose "evil" is not to suggest "frail humans, but the nature of human frailty".²² Cain is what MacAndrew will term an embodiment "of spiritually misshapen humanity with the unfulfilled potential to have shared natural grace and beauty".²³ His curse is a perennial striving for what he could have "potentially" achieved but which will now remain out of his reach, and yet will haunt him forever. Indeed, the mark that God places on Cain (v. 15) is the mark of the double which he must now persistently carry within him.

The viability of using Gothic aesthetics to carefully unpack the ambiguities inherent in specific narratives from the Tanakh cannot be emphasised enough. This essay is merely a brief exploration of how this can be performed. Read as a story about the double, the theological significance of the Cain and Abel myth as reflective of the state of the spiritually divided person gains vital prominence. Because of the Gothic's transgressive nature in articulating the unspeakable, what a narrative suppresses textually can profitably be unearthed using the interpretive technologies which the Gothic offers. It is hoped that this essay will encourage more literary-critical interrogations of the Tanakh from a Gothic perspective. It is the opinion of this writer that the range of Gothic tropes—the uncanny, the abject, hybridity, monstrosity and vampirism (to name a few)—can serve as useful aesthetical tools to open up interesting and innovative theoretical approaches to understand the Tanakh by exposing otherwise "unspeakable" or "unconscious" deep structures that are embedded in specific narratives.²⁴

²¹ Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 6.

²² Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), 81.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁴ See Timothy Beal's insightful explication of Genesis 1 through the trope of the monster in his *Religion and its Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2002).

THE BAROQUE PROPHETS: AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE HEBREW PROPHETS AND JOHN DONNE¹

Yvonne Sherwood

Literary Study of the Bible as Deflected Worship: The Misfit Prophets

The history of the engagement between The Bible and Literature has been shaped by a certain conservatism and telling omissions. From the side of Literature, the tendency has been to focus on writers who explicitly reference the Bible or who have an explicit Christian or Jewish affiliation. There have been relatively few studies that attempt to explore the texture of biblical writing and the aesthetics of the biblical by analogy with other writers. Where such work exists, the tendency has been to seek out the most auspicious, ancient and High Cultural conversation partners. As in the British Radio Four programme *Desert Island Discs*, the Bible finds a natural companion in lofty cultural icons such as Shakespeare—or modes of classical rhetoric. These studies are often illuminating, but taken *en masse* they reinforce a restricted definition of the ‘literary’ in Biblical Studies that reinforces the antiquity and high cultural status of the text. The ‘literary’ as it is known in Literature Departments is a vast and variegated terrain. Once it comes into contact with the biblical, the literary seems to shrink down into more restricted canon and a generally moderate, smooth aesthetic. There are few literary studies of the Bible that seek out conversations with, say, the visceral and bloodied lines of Ted Hughes, the disjunctive rhythms of Gerard Hopkins, the mutating puns of James Joyce, the Gothic vision of Mary Shelley or the cryptic modernism of Ezra Pound.²

¹ This article represents a substantial revision of earlier work in ‘“Darke Texts Needs Notes”: Prophetic Poetry, John Donne and the Baroque’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27.1 (2002), 47–74 and ‘Prophetic Scatology: Prophecy and the Art of Sensation’ in Stephen D. Moore (ed.), *In Search of the Present: The Bible through Cultural Studies* (Semeia 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2002), 183–224.

² For a significant exception, see Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) and Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

This is surprising as one might expect encounters with the sacred to push and expand definitions of the literary. One could envisage a turn to religion in literature analogous to the current turn to religion in continental philosophy—a seeking out of religion in order to trouble and dislocate existing philosophical categories. It seems symptomatic of secularisation that encounters between the Bible and literature have not, on the whole, opted for an exploration of exceptional divine effects, instead tending to normalise the biblical by translating it into the literary as the human and humane. In a tantalisingly brief aside in his *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad comments on a specifically modern phenomenon whereby a ‘newly emerging concept of *literature*’ is brought ‘to the aid of religious sensibilities’, adding that ‘If the Bible is read as art (whether as poetry or myth or philosophy) this is because a complicated historical development of disciplines and sensibilities has made it possible to do so’. Looking at the opening pages of a book titled *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Literature* published in Britain before the Second World War, Asad is intrigued by the protest the Introduction makes to the effect that ‘a concern for literary reading is no derogation of its sacred status’ and the author’s emphatic statement that ‘to make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both’. As Asad comments, this statement is itself a secular expression of the text’s malleability.³ More could be said about the use of the literary to translate the Judeo-Christian into universally accepted categories of value and the perception of the literary as coming to the aid of beleaguered religion. Turning the Bible into a literary (or indeed historical) document consolidates one of the primary definitions of secularisation: the privatisation or marginalisation of religion, religion translating itself into ‘universal’ categories. The translation of the biblical into a superlative object of worship—the Best Book in human terms—is thus, paradoxically, at the same time an expression of religion undergoing something of a cultural cringe.

The curious contraction of the literary when it came into contact with the Bible was a symptom of two key pressures: the need to use literary criticism as deflected worship, and a rudimentary understanding of the literary as an alternative to, and even the opposite of, Historical Criticism. Arriving in the midst of a too-devout historicism, definitions

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 9.

of the literary were shaped in contrast to modes of historical criticism that obsessively decomposed the texts into sources and fragments. This tugged the literary in the direction of New Criticism, the idea of the text as 'artfully crafted discourse' or 'well-wrought urn'.⁴ The shape of the literary in Biblical Studies emerged within the polemical desire to establish the overarching *intentions* of authors (ghost-writers for the divine author) and to prove synchronic cohesion and the literary value of the text as a carefully constructed whole. The ideology of *belles lettres* was applied to ancient texts that long preceded and were oblivious to such aesthetics. The literary in Biblical Studies eschewed the historical—but at the same time there was something more recently old-fashioned (perhaps Victorian or Edwardian) about the forms it took. Literary criticism of the Bible frequently echoed Matthew Arnold's litany about the Bible as the 'best book'⁵ in both a moral and aesthetic sense. It often conceived of itself as on an Arnoldian crusade to prove that there was 'genius before Homer'.⁶ Translating religious value into generic human terms, and so preserving the Bible's universal appeal, literary studies of the Bible often took the form of deflected worship. They congregated around apostrophes to the Bible's indescribable richness, beauty and craft and thus re-established, in slightly adjusted language, the Bible's rightful place among the superlatives, in the heights.

Maintaining the literary in the doubly-restricted sense of the artfully crafted whole and the superlative has inevitably constrained the texts that can be used to represent the Bible. Attention has been focussed

⁴ See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dobson, 1968 [1947]). Considered a manifesto of so-called New Criticism, *The Well Wrought Urn* treated poems as self-contained entities and reacted against a then dominant historicist/biographical tendency in literary criticism. In a similar vein, literary studies of biblical poetry and prose emphasise the ideal of 'artfully crafted discourse' (cf. J.K. Kuntz, 'Biblical Hebrew Poetry in Recent Research, Part I', *Currents in Research* 6 [1998], 31–64 [47]).

⁵ The idea of the Bible as 'best book' or cultural repository of all civilising forces, was famously expressed by Matthew Arnold when he declared that 'there is one English book and one only where... perfect plainness of speech is allied with perfect nobleness, and that book is the Bible' ('On Translating Homer' [1861] in R. Super [ed.], *On the Classical Tradition* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960], 97–216). However, the allusion to the Bible's occasional 'plainness of speech' may point to precisely the 'sub-literary' effects represented by, among others, the Prophets.

⁶ An allusion to a statement in J.L. McKenzie, 'The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2–3', *Theological Studies* 15 (1954), 541–572 (572): 'Let us not think that wit and irony, profundity and wisdom were beyond the reach of the ancient Hebrew story-tellers; there was genius before Homer'.

on those narrative and poetic portions best able to function as ambassadors for the Bible as a consummate work of art. Conversely, those portions of biblical literature least-suited to this proof of the Bible's literary value—the Prophets—have generally been left out in the cold. For as Herbert Marks explains, the Prophets prove impossible to fit into models of literature defined on holistic, New Critical lines:

The received texts [of the Prophets] are cluttered and chaotic, and the signs of literary shaping have studiously to be recovered from under a welter of vestiges and interpolations. Even where deliberate patterns may be traced, they frequently overlies one another, like the superimposed figures of paleolithic cave art... The presence of discordant features that resist assimilation... contributes largely to the aesthetic impact of the collections, which in the self-occlusion of their rough formal structures, as in the sheer abundance of their "difficult ornaments" are the reflection or perhaps the model of Israel's image of the divine.⁷

Compiled according to a filing system that seems perverse by Western (conceptual, philosophical) standards, oracles are often placed adjacent to one another on the basis of a shared pun or catchword. So for example Isaiah 58.13–14 (a thoroughly traditional interpretation of the sabbath) is appended to verses 1–12 (a radical reinterpretation of fasting) because the two are joined by the keyword s.b.t. ('sabbath' or 'to rest'). Continuity of sound leads to lurches of meaning, as the text turns on what Marks calls 'redactional hinges'. By often using sound rather than sense as a primary linking principle, prophetic literature commits overt sins against Western Metaphysics and related concepts of literature as a unifying craft.

Where the Prophets have been analysed in literary terms, the tendency has been to coerce them into one of two basic literary models: Renaissance rhetoricians or Romantic poets. Both models are constructed around the persona of the imagined author. The former envisages the prophet as rhetorician or consummate gentleman-craftsman—a kind of ancient Israelite Philip Sidney. Thus the biblical prophets become experts in the Classical and Renaissance arts of *prodesare* and *delectare*, ingeniously manipulating words so as to lure 'harde harted evill men' to the love of virtue 'as if they tooke a medicine of cherries'.⁸ In this

⁷ Herbert Marks, 'The Twelve Prophets', in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana, 1989), 212.

⁸ Philip Sidney, 'An Apologie for Poesie' in R. Dutton (ed.), *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Writings: Astrophil and Stella, The Defence of Poetry and Miscellaneous Poems* (Manchester: Fyfield, 1987 [1595]), 121.

mode, literary biblical critic Yehoshua Gitay imagines Isaiah wielding a range of rhetorical instruments extracted from Renaissance works such as Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593).⁹ In 1984, Richard Clifford prefaced his study of Deutero-Isaiah with a citation from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*:

He was a scholar, a ripe and good one;
Exceeding wise, fair-spoken and persuading:
Lofty and sour to them that lov'd him not
But to those men that saught him, sweet as summer'
(Henry VIII, IV.ii.50–54).

Symptomatic of the preferred literary emphasis on the sweet is the title of Clifford's study: *Fair Spoken and Persuading* rather than 'Lofty and Sour'.¹⁰

The alternative model for prophetic poets could not be further away from the accomplished graduate of 'Prophet School' clutching his diploma. William Blake saw prophetic literature as the ancient template for the Romantic poem produced entirely '*without Labour or Study*', so turning Prophets into something approaching the literary equivalent of the sacred icon as *archeipoiētos*, not made by human hands.¹¹ At first glance this is in sharp contradistinction to the Rhetorical emphasis on sublime handicraft, superlatively 'made'. But though the emphasis is on inspiration rather than craftsmanship, deviation rather than conformity, Romantic literary models still attempted to *unify* the disparate text through the figure of the inspired character-author at its heart. Working on the principle that, as Schiller put it, 'Like the Deity behind this universe [the poet/prophet] stands behind the work; he is himself the work, the work is himself', or that as Herder put it, 'the book is the impression [*Ausdruck*] of a living human soul'¹² the Romantic model facilitated the substitution of Jeremiah or Isaiah the book with Jeremiah or Isaiah the man. Prophecy was thus converted into narrative—as biography—or its poetic equivalent, lyric (poetry

⁹ Yehoshua Gitay, *Isaiah and His Audience: Structure and Meaning of Isaiah 1–12* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991).

¹⁰ Richard Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

¹¹ William Blake, 'From a Letter of 25 April 1803 to Thomas Butts' in Michael Mason (ed.), *William Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70–71.

¹² M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 236–238.

in the first person). The chaotic corpus was reorganised around the gravitational pull of a central 'I'.

Taken together, the Romantic and Rhetorical models display the rather limited models that have been used to gesture towards the sacred: on the one hand, the human construct, the supremely crafting hand; on the other, transcendence as an entirely hands-off effect. Both focus on the mediating figure of the exceptional author: exceptionally convincing, exceptionally able to affect his readers, or, alternatively, in a liberal translation of the fundamentalist truism, the author who is effectively a stand-in or ghost-writer for the divine. The metaphysical or transcendent is lazily and habitually envisaged as the antithesis or negation of the merely material or physical. This leads to a severe amputation of the often boldly and even grossly embodied prophetic corpus. Northrop Frye claims that 'The city, the garden and the sheepfold are the organising metaphors of the Bible'.¹³ In the same vein, Ezekiel becomes an exercise in prophetic pastoral, centred on 'the vine, the shepherd and the cedar tree'¹⁴ rather than, say, excrement, humiliated harlots and boiled body parts.

However, occasional comments break out of this concerted *Apologie for Prophetie*. The Prophets have a 'queer' way of talking, Luther complained.¹⁵ Commentators forced by their profession to go through the biblical texts word for word sometimes mutter about passages that seem 'ugly' and convulsive or 'express want of delicacy'.¹⁶ Harold Fisch has explored Hosea under the rubric of a 'poetics of violence'.¹⁷ Abraham Heschel speaks of the prophetic idiom as 'luminous and explosive... a fusion of contradictions' and Thomas Jemielity explores the 'volatile energy' and civility-inverting, wor(l)d-shattering force of prophetic

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 141.

¹⁴ Ronald Clements, *Ezekiel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 6.

¹⁵ Luther, cited without reference in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965, 2 volumes), II 33.

¹⁶ Norman Whybray observes how the 'simile of the woman in travail' is 'reinforced by a breathless convulsive style which seems ugly to modern taste' (*Isaiah 40–66*, [New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 78). König objects to the sheer volume of female flesh on display in Ezekiel 3, and tuts that the prophet 'could equally have achieved his purpose by different methods of treatment' (cit. E. Ullendorff, *The Bawdy Bible* [The Fifth Sacks Lecture, May 18, 1978; Oxford: Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Postgraduate Studies, 1978], 439).

¹⁷ Harold Fisch, 'Hosea: A Poetics of Violence', in *Poetry With a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 136–157.

words.¹⁸ Feminist and gender critics have dissected the prophetic God's brutal domination over territories and nations embodied as women, and subjected to entrapment, humiliation and rape.¹⁹ Hermann Gunkel's 'The Prophets as Writers and Poets', written in 1923, writes of Prophetic literature as 'dark', 'stammering', 'secretive', 'shadowy', 'virtually demonic', 'bizarre', 'colossal' and '*baroque*'.²⁰ Harold Fisch provocatively writes of the Bible as 'literature' and 'anti-literature'²¹—though such a statement can only, of course, be produced using a narrow definition of literature. Sometimes I suspect that literary studies of the Bible deliberately confine themselves to a limited range of analogues so that the way in which the Bible does not map onto these models can lazily be taken as proof of the Bible's surplus of sacredness. Having described the vicious satire on the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14 as 'anti-epic', Fisch then goes on to argue that this shows that prophetic poetry distrusts the 'mere' structures of the imagination and goes beyond 'mere literary effects'.²²

The supra-literary or anti-literary is a curious definition of the religious, but one that has a long pedigree.²³ Too often such claims are made by way of literary proof of the Bible's greatness—a statement of literary-spiritual faith, in effect—or they relapse back into a simplistic opposition between the metaphysical and the merely physical, the more-than-literary and the merely literary. Should such assertions be opened up into the rich seam of questions that they hint at, then one of the key questions that would emerge would be: 'How to write for and as God, in a language that is nevertheless comprehensible to us?' or 'How, when you are speaking for the deity, do you make your speech

¹⁸ Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 51; Heschel, *The Prophets*, 6–7.

¹⁹ For examples of this now massive body of work see Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), reprinted as *The Prostitute and the Prophet: A Test Case in Re-Reading the Prophets* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004).

²⁰ Herman Gunkel (trans. J.L. Schaaf), 'The Prophets as Writers and Poets' [1923] in David L. Petersen (ed.), *Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 22–73 (25; 34; 38, 39, 46, 47).

²¹ Fisch, *Poetry With a Purpose*, 2.

²² Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 2.

²³ For a classic and often quoted statement see T.S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature' (1935) in Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

sufficiently *other*, sufficiently *marked*?²⁴ To write for and as God is to attempt to create a very distinctive literary condition, and one worthy of further investigation. Indeed, one might imagine such questions to be at the centre of literary studies of the Bible and sacred texts. But it is the passages that seek, most directly, to speak for God that have received the least literary attention to date. This may be because literary study represents a 'liberal' line of enquiry that fears sliding into fundamentalism, even though it unconsciously apes it in loose vague talk of inspiration. It may be a symptom of literary study as a secularising humanising practice, with a distinct aversion to the exceptional-divine and a settled preference for the generic human/humane.

Intriguingly, modes of Bible as Literature as currently conceived may be least well-equipped to deal with passages where the Bible becomes the Word of God in an overt, verbatim sense. The fact that the Prophets speak most directly for God may help to explain why the Prophets are generally beyond the pale of literary study of the Bible, as it is currently defined. While not directly relating his point to the phenomenon of divine speech, Herbert Marks makes a tantalising suggestion. Perhaps difficulty—encrypted in the sheer abundance of [the Prophet's] "difficult ornaments" is the reflection or perhaps the model of Israel's image of the divine'.²⁵

*The Aesthetics of Prophecy and the Aesthetics of Wisdom: Delicate
Wordsmithery versus World/Word-Splintering Force*

'Israel', of course, does not have one image of the divine, and the composite biblical corpus encompasses many different literary genres. The contrasts can be seen in sharp outline if we compare the Hebrew Prophets to Wisdom Literature—a category that, in the shared Protestant, Catholic and Jewish canons, centres on the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. In both genres—Prophecy and Wisdom—words helpfully speak self-consciously about what kinds of words they are seeking to be and what they are trying to achieve.

²⁴ Writing on the divine speech from the whirlwind in Job (a more obvious 'literary masterpiece'), Robert Alter raises, in passing, the crucial question: 'If we could actually hear God talking, making His will manifest in words of the Hebrew language, what would He sound like?' (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985], 141).

²⁵ Marks, 'The Twelve Prophets', 212.

Wisdom words are proffered as choice delicacies to be savoured, tried on the palate and combined in new thought-recipes (Job 12.11: 'Does not the ear try words as the palate tastes food?'). They are described as 'apples of gold in settings of silver': jewels to be set in a sentence as a precious stone is set in a ring (Prov. 25.11). I imagine the writers arranging their *mots justes* like old-fashioned typesetters carefully lining up individual metal letters. Indeed the Wisdom tradition imagines the act of arranging words as a verbal siege barrier against one's opponents, or like pieces strategically positioned at the start of a game (see Job 33.5; Job 16.4). In a 'whirlwind' of discourse, the Wisdom writer seeks out the words that will act as a fixed point or a 'mooring stake for the tongue' (*Amen-em-opet* 1.15–16).²⁶ Good Wisdom words can be recognised by their ability to soothe, kiss and *nourish*. Wisdom, far more than Prophecy, would merit comparison with Sir Philip Sidney's rhetorical 'medicene of cherries'. Words that sting like vinegar or run with an ugly gait like a lame man's legs are the ultimate definition of bad words for the Wisdom writer (Prov. 24.26; 18.20; Job 16.5; Prov. 25.20; 26.7). The Wisdom tradition is acutely concerned with preserving decorum and respecting boundaries. The book of Proverbs is zealous about keeping the wise man and the so-called 'strange woman' apart. Though the Wisdom writers sometimes employ riddles, those riddles are presented as something like a crossword puzzle—tributes to the capacity of the circle of the Wise to decode them (cf. Prov. 1.5–6). The riddle functions to reinforce the cohesion of the learned elite and to oil the wheels of social/linguistic exchange.

Prophetic words, in contrast, frequently present themselves as slashing through the social fabric and the language that sustains it. They are, for example, (s)words that slice the people in two, leaden weights that lie heavy on the land and fire that devours people like wood (Hos. 6.5; Amos 7.10; Jer. 5.14). Rather than securing discourse, prophetic literature subjects moored concepts to the effect of the whirlwind or the earthquake. It manipulates the inherent fragility of words to provoke crises in the cerebral cortex that mirror those of the prophetic and national body. Prophetic 'rhetoric' seems to define itself through the denial of the luxury of stretching out in accepted meanings, rather as the rich and secure in Amos are denied the luxury of stretching out in

²⁶ *The Instruction of Amen-em-opet* is an Egyptian papyrus containing thirty chapters of proverbs that in parts show close correspondence to the biblical book of Proverbs.

their ivory beds (Amos 6.4–7). The prophetic tradition seeks to make our own homes and traditions radically unfamiliar and strange to us—to bring the strange woman home, so to speak. This is a process that the book of Amos makes graphic and overt in relentless portrayals of the destruction of the house (Amos 3.15; 6.9–11; 5.19; cf. 6.1 and 5.11).

Prophetic style seems to actively scavenge for words and phrases that, in Wisdom terms, *fail*, stinging like vinegar or running like a lame man's legs (cf. Prov. 25.20; 26.7). It is interesting that, in the attempt to describe bad/failed words, the Wisdom tradition uses metaphors of words that hurt, dis-able or embarrass the human body. For the prophetic word seems to actively dis-able and cause the speaker to stutter or stumble. The prophetic writer/speaker is often presented not as a composed or composing author, but one discomposed by the words that he utters. The Prophets tend not to offer a composed portrait of the author, for our admiration, but rather embarrassing gestures from which we instinctively avert our eyes. Admittedly Ezekiel finds that the scroll of God tastes like honey and Jeremiah eats God's words and finds them a delight (Ezek. 3.1–3; Jer. 15.16). But it would be naive to convert these statements into easy truisms about the pleasantness and beauty of prophetic literature. For Ezekiel, the words of God seem to go through the digestive system and manifest themselves in self-defeating, self-humiliating actions. In Jeremiah's case the word that he eats is hardly an easily consumable delicacy (as it might be in the Wisdom tradition) but rather a fire, burning him up from the inside.

As for the speaker/writer, so for the hearer/reader. Instead of proffering flatteringly entangled puzzles as tributes to the intelligence of one's conversation partner, prophetic texts deal in sealed books, deaf ears and closed eyes (Isa. 6.6–9; 29.11). The humiliation of the body and its subjection to pain and embarrassment is used to foreground the dis-ability or profound inability or both speaker/writer and audience. Prophecy reiterates non-eloquence in figures of the prophet's silenced, stammering, stuttering mouth (Ezek. 2.26; cf. Isaiah 6.5; cf. Exodus 6.12). Ezekiel is concerned *not* to be praised for 'skilfully executed love songs, or pretty [flute] songs' and mere (?) metaphor making (Ezek. 33. 30–32; Ezek. 20.49). A scenario in which the writer is praised for his mellifluous skill is anathema to the Prophet though it would, one imagines, make the Wisdom writer glow with pride. Prophecy teems with accounts of the opposition and alienation of its audience, reporting the audience's counter-cries for 'straight/smooth things'—as opposed to

the prophet's crooked speech?—and 'pretty songs' (Isa. 30.11; Jer. 6.14; Ezek 13.8–13). Since an author or editor has executive power to exclude counter-voices, they must be included because they assist the main text in some way. In this case, they help to elucidate the precise nature of this text through their acts of recoil and protest. That prophecy is too ugly, too disturbing and too vulgar is more than an accidental side-protest; it is an integral part of this particular literature's self-definition. One definition of true prophecy is that it comes true in the future (cf. Deut. 13.1–5 and 18.15–22). Another more interesting definition is that it alienates and fails.

For me, the Wisdom writers call to mind so-called Augustan writers such as Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson.²⁷ I can imagine the savants of Israel congregating in the newly fashionable coffeehouses in early modern Europe, and nodding sagely in agreement as Pope pronounces that 'True wit is nature to advantage dress'd/What oft was thought but ne'er so well express'd/Something whose truth convinced at sight we find/That gives us back the image of our mind', or that 'true expression, like th' unchanging sun/Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon/It gilds all objects, but it alters none'.²⁸ The analogies run deep. For the traditional Wisdom writers as for the Augustans, wit/wisdom is the apposite expression of nature and God is expressed, or even buried, in the natural order. Pope is in some sense a 'Deist' in that God finds expression in the rational order of the universe, the 'rightness' of what 'is'. The same is, in a sense, true for the Wisdom writers. God does not intervene directly as in other parts of the Hebrew canon, but is made quietly manifest in the quiet order and reason of the cosmos. Much rests, therefore, on the consonance between word and world and the fittingness of their relations. Theological and poetic truth come together in the expression of the inner harmony of what 'is'.

Whereas the Wisdom writers seem to find a natural affinity with the eighteenth century and the Augustans, the Hebrew Prophets seem most at home in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, I want to experiment with an analogy between the Prophets and the so-called metaphysical poets, in particular John Donne. Like the Prophets, Donne has often been cast as an awkward outsider to the literary proper

²⁷ Robert Alter also suggests an analogy between Augustan wit and the Wisdom tradition, specifically the book of Proverbs, though on rather different grounds (see Alter, 'The Poetry of Wit', *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 163–184, esp. 164–165).

²⁸ Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, II.

and has provoked protests about his work being 'shaggy' and 'savage',²⁹ and therefore provides alternative ways of thinking what the 'literary' might be. To flesh out Gunkel's now almost century-old hint, Donne and the Prophets seem to share an aesthetics of exaggeration, turbulence, immensity, grandeur, misshapen forms, distorted perspectives, sudden angles, shock and *trompe l'oeil* effects: the aesthetics of the baroque.

The curious term 'metaphysical poets', first coined by Samuel Johnson to describe Donne and Abraham Cowley, implies that what is (negatively or positively) striking about this mode of writing is an ingenuity that strays too far beyond and above and against the truth of what 'is'. Johnson complained:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions... their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.³⁰

There is much in his complaint that calls to mind the prophetic corpus, as it seems to actively seek out difficulty and impossibility and strive to ensure that the displeasure of the reader/hearer is guaranteed. Alexander Pope, while in many respects a fan of Donne, probably had some of the writers that Johnson would later deem 'metaphysical' in mind when he complained of metaphors refracted in multiple directions as through a 'prismatic glass' and a violation of decorum and proportion: 'work where nothing's just or fit/One glaring chaos and wild heap of wit'.³¹

There may be something appropriately audacious about attempting, across millennia and disciplines, a violent yoking between Donne and the Prophets. In his *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution*, historian Christopher Hill writes: 'One advantage of the Bible is that, like history, it links everything with everything else: some-

²⁹ C.S. Lewis condemned Donne's *Satires* as 'shaggy and savage, unmetrical in versification, disgusting in diction, and obscure in thought' (cit. J.R. Roberts, 'John Donne's Poetry: An Assessment of Modern Criticism', in Arthur L. Clements [ed.], *John Donne's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism* [New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1992], 351–361 [357]).

³⁰ Samuel Johnson 'The Metaphysical Poets', from *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81) in Clements (ed.), *John Donne's Poetry*, 142–145 (143).

³¹ Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, II.

times with the daring effects of metaphysical poetry'.³² Fascinatingly he describes history as a literary enterprise in which consequence is like analogy. Curiously bypassing the Prophets—arguably the portion of the canon most frequently cited in the seventeenth century—and taking less extreme and more familiar examples from Job and the gospels, Hill hazards that the biblical penchant for what he calls (quite mildly) 'paradox' would have 'delighted those who eagerly read Donne'. He then raises the question 'Did the vernacular Bible prepare for and influence metaphysical poetry, or did the mood which produced that poetry open men's minds to this aspect of the Biblical message?'—a question that brings back into play his own analogy between analogy or metaphysical conceit and cause and effect. Though the nature of history and analogy is such that there can be no way of definitively answering his question, it is hard to imagine that—in a context where as Richard Hooker put it 'there is no part of true philosophy, no art of account, no kind of science [*including science of commonwealth*] rightly so called, but the Scripture must contain it'³³—a 'metaphysical' aesthetic could evolve from a cultural space entirely outside the Bible. Certainly in his sermons, Dr. Donne seems on intimate terms with those particularly 'peculiar [biblical] figure[s]'³⁴ that modernity has strategically forgotten. He homes in on the Bible's more extravagant, mind-twisting metaphors which he prefers to portions of the Psalms that seem, in his words, 'limited and restrained'.³⁵ He seizes on prophetic passages about God as lion and bear, mangling the body of the people (Hos. 13.8) or God whistling for the fly-Assyria in Isaiah 7.18 (a precedent, perhaps for his own flea-conceit?), and amplifies them in his own distinctive manner:

I will meet them, says God (when hee is pleased, he says, he will wait for them), as a *Bear* (no longer a Dove), as a *Bear robbed of her whelpes*, (sensible of his injuries) and *I will rent the caule of their hearts* (shiver them in peeces with a dispersion, with a discernption)...³⁶

³² Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution* (Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1993), 340–341.

³³ Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I, xiv, 1, cit. Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution*, 23.

³⁴ George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (eds.), *The Sermons of John Donne* (10 vols; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62) II, 55.

³⁵ Potter and Simpson (ed.), *Sermons* II, 50.

³⁶ Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons* III, 86.

If he doe but *sibilare muscam*, hisse and whisper for the flye, and the Bee, there is nothing so little in his hand, as cannot discomfort thee, discomfit thee, dissolve and pow'r out, attenuate and annihilate the very marrow of thy soul.³⁷

Audacious Couplings

The historical-analogical relationship between Donne and the Prophets seems far less strained than the relations that Donne and the Prophets create themselves. For as James Winny puts it, Donne 'strains [metaphorical] relationships to the point where they are about to crack'.³⁸ If we take Nelson Goodman's definition of metaphor as a 'happy if bigamous second marriage' for a word,³⁹ I.A. Richard's description of a tenor and vehicle linked by ground, Max Black's image of metaphor as 'category confusion' and Coleridge's sage claim that no metaphor runs on all four legs at once, then Donne delights in dysfunctional and polygamous marriages, virtually groundless relationships between tenor and vehicle, categories that are absurdly confused, and metaphors that don't so much walk on four or three or two legs as hop awkwardly on one. Not only is Donne's writing full of images of twisted joinings—the knotty trinity, the firm cement between lovers 'intergrafted' hands, the twisted strings between their eyes⁴⁰—but he seems to be obsessed with threading unlike things together on tangled metaphorical strings. In Donne's strangely restrung world, lovers' eyes gazing on one another are 'like' beads threaded on a double-string by twisted eye-beams ('The Ecstasy'); baptism is like a wardrobe because you put on Christ (*Sermons*);⁴¹ a flea is like a marriage cloister where the mingled bloods of a man and woman meet ('The Flea'); God is like a 'holy thirsty dropsy' coursing through the body (Divine Poems 15); wrinkles are like trenches in which love sits like an anchorite ('The Autumnall'); a bride is like a lamb disembowelled by her lover-priest ('Epithalamion

³⁷ Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons* III, 86.

³⁸ James L. Winny, *A Preface to Donne* (London: Longman, 1981), 95.

³⁹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1968), 73.

⁴⁰ The image of the knotty trinity comes from Holy Sonnet 12 ('Father, part of his double interest...'). The 'intergrafted hands', the 'firm cement' and the twisted strings between lovers' eyes are from 'The Ecstasy'.

⁴¹ Potter and Simpson, *Sermons* II, 66: 'Baptisme is Gods Wardrobe; there *Induimur Christo*; In Baptisme we put on Christ; there we are invested, apparell'd in Christ'.

made at Lincolnes Inn'); and the overcoming of the soul by God is like begged-for rape or siege (Holy Sonnet 10: 'Batter my Heart...'). One of the characteristics of baroque architecture is a sense of shock, achieved through impossible angles and unexpected corners. Similarly Donne's poetry makes sudden swerves around conceptual corners. In 'A Valediction: Of Weeping', a woman's face in her tears make the tears like 'coins' then, in the next line, like 'wombs'.

It is this disrespect for the decorum of the 'is' or 'is like' that seems to make Donne most like the Prophets. God opens the book of Hosea by marrying a prostitute to a prophet in a violent and heterogeneous yoking that suggests that, like Donne, he has a penchant for category violation.⁴² The prophetic corpus is full of similar metaphysical conceits such as a priest dirtying his hands with pollution (Ezekiel 4); the sea-ploughing oxen of Amos 6.12; the comparison of Assyria to a genital razor, shaving the pubic hair of the body politic (Isa. 7.20); the figure of Israel and Judah clinging to Yhwh like a loincloth hugging the loins (Jer. 13.11); and the comparison of a man, Eliakim, to a 'peg' on the very slender ground that you can hang the whole weight of his father's house, every child, every cup and every flagon from him (Isa. 22.23). With too much hanging from it and the peg looking like it is about to break, the Eliakim figure can be seen as a figure for the kind of metaphors preferred by the God of the Prophets and John Donne. Prophetic literature also turns sudden conceptual corners. In a shift as hard to imagine as the mutation from tears to coins to wombs, Jacob is depicted as a worm then as a sharp-toothed threshing sledge (Isa. 41.14–16).⁴³ The cow-women of Bashan suddenly change species to be dragged away on fish-hooks (Amos 4.2). The book of Amos in particular seems to force violent conjunctions that speak both of physical death and the disintegration of the image. Thus the remnant of the nation becomes a salvaged couch corner or two legs and part of an ear retrieved from the lion's mouth (Amos 3.12) while starvation mutates into 'the gift of cleanness of teeth' (Amos 4.6). In a violent and ingenious twist that Donne would have loved and Johnson would have hated, hunger is described as if it were dental floss, and God is depicted, perversely, as giving lack. (Compare his gift of 'miscarrying wombs and dry breasts'

⁴² Cf. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*.

⁴³ Gunkel cites this as an example of how the 'strangest and most baroque elements clash' ('The Prophets as Writers and Poets', 47).

in Hos 9.14, where the retraction of life and sustenance is similarly portrayed as a gift).

To describe starvation as the gift of cleanness of teeth is to violate decorum on so many levels. Death/annihilation is sardonically described as blessing and the massive collides with the trivial. As if in a perverse version of the silver lining to every cloud, the comparison scandalises by saying, effectively, 'At least if you starve you don't have to worry about your teeth'. Prophetic literature, like Donne, actively seeks out a poetics of violation. We recoil from images of genital razors, clean teeth, pegs and couch-corners for these seem too prosaic, too improper for poetry—just like Donne with his wardrobes, dropsy and fleas. In some cases in the prophetic corpus, the twisted strings of logic represent the tangled or even broken strings of the covenant. Language goes astray, sense is violated, and fidelity to logic is broken in imitation of the infidelity of the people. The broken or strained faith of the conceit and its ability to couple with almost anything else shadows the promiscuity of sin. But the meaning of violation is much broader and more extensive than this. Audacious couplings are not just a sign of sin, for they take place within the theological. Whereas other corners of the biblical canon keep God safe under a set repertoire of images, the Prophets risk all kinds of heterogeneous linkages between, say, God-ness and bear-ness, Godness and illness, Godness and femaleness or Godness and tiredness. They present the deity as a woman in labour, a she-bear, a birdcatcher, a leopard, an exhausted warrior or a wine-stained tramp (Isa. 42.14–15; Hos. 13.8; Isa. 63.1–6).⁴⁴ In an image strongly reminiscent of Donne's experience of the divine as a 'holy thirsty dropsy' that 'melts him', God is described as pus in the body politic or rot in the nation's joists (Hos. 5.12).⁴⁵ In a shock of 'Batter my Heart' proportions, God metaphorically seduces or rapes the prophet (Jer. 20.7).⁴⁶ Literary critics seem oblivious

⁴⁴ I am following John Sawyer's reading of Isa 63.1–6. See Sawyer, 'Radical Images of Yahweh in Isaiah 63', in Philip R. Davies and David J.A. Clines (ed.), *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (JSOTSup144; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 72–82.

⁴⁵ One German translation renders Hos. 5.12 as 'Ich aber bin wie Eiter (pus) für Efraim/wie Faulnis (rottenness) für das Haus Juda' (Katholische Bibelanstalt, 1980).

⁴⁶ The Hebrew verb seems to straddle the meanings to entice/seduce (cf. Exod 22.15 and Hos. 2.16) and to deceive (cf. Judg 14.15; 16.5 and 1 Kings 22.20–22). Though both are striking accusations against Yhwh, the standard lexicon *Brown-Driver-Briggs* pushes the reader towards the more proper meaning 'deceived'. It is left to bolder readers such as James Crenshaw to argue the case for an even greater impropriety of

to such biblical precedents. Critical comments on 'Batter my Heart' occasionally invoke another of Jeremiah's far milder metaphors—the clay and the potter—but entirely bypass the prototype of the sexually overpowered prophet. This seeming unawareness of the more scandalous prophetic images seems to reflect a rather sanitised presentation of biblical literature and the Bible's contemporary role as vague cultural icon rather than complex and variegated text.

Vile Bodies

One of the reasons that these so-called metaphysical conceits offend is because they are light on the 'meta' and extremely heavy on the 'physical', especially where we might expect poetry to become most metaphysical and transcendent—in proximity to the divine. Donne's poetry, like the Prophets, combines God and sex and perversions/abnormalities of the body. It oozes with images of 'sweaty froth' and 'menstruous boiles' ('The Comparison') jelly-like flesh and 'spungie livers' ('The Progresse of the Soule'). In fact, writing from a context more intimately acquainted with the details of the Bible, Thomas de Quincey described 'The Progress of the Soule' as 'having the fervent and gloomy sublimity of *Ezekiel* or *Aeschylus*'.⁴⁷ T.S. Eliot describes how the poems seize the reader by the 'cerebral cortex, the nervous system and the digestive tracts',⁴⁸ and John Carey argues that the effect of the poems is akin to the 'jumpy touched-to-the-quick feeling from watching films of surgical operations'. Indeed, they so teem with 'sense impressions' that you 'take them in through your skin and body as much as through your mind'.⁴⁹

prophetic speech (see Crenshaw, 'Seduction and Rape: the Confessions of Jeremiah' in *A Whirlwind of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 31–56).

⁴⁷ Thomas de Quincey cit. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 148.

⁴⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' in Eliot, *Collected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 290.

⁴⁹ Carey, *John Donne*, 67, 150. The allusions to 'sweaty froth' and 'ripe menstuous boiles' can be found in 'The Comparison'; to jelly flesh and 'spungie livers' in 'The Progresse of the Soule'; and to flesh as mud in Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons* II, 83.

If Culture, capital C, is partly defined by a gigantic human effort to transcend the body⁵⁰ this partly accounts for the cultural indigestibility of Donne and the Prophets. For the Prophetic corpus is also acutely visceral and corporeal. With images of writhing on too short beds with too short covers (Isa. 28.19), of being slopped like liquid from one container to another (Jer. 48.11), or of lying face down and making your back like a street for the oppressors to pass over (Isa. 51.23), this is a poetry that feels profoundly the insecurities and vacillations of being human and that seeks to make itself felt by exploiting and foregrounding the vulnerability of the flesh and the brain. The Prophets habitually subject the figure of the national and individual body to verbal and visual decomposition (Isa. 1.6). The prophet's body is frequently offered up as if by way of sacrificial symbol for the sacrificial poetics of the prophetic corpus. Subject to an imperative not his own, submitting to a social/bodily abjection that would be anathema to the Wisdom writer, he must, for example, go naked and barefoot; have sex with a prostitute; betray what he 'is' by transgressing priestly prohibitions; offer up parts of his own body as physical stage for prophetic tropes or bind himself with ropes and submit to a yoke of straps and bars (Jeremiah 13; Hosea 1–1; Ezekiel 4 and 5; Jeremiah 27 and 28).

The vulnerability of the body coalesces around the central figure of the violated female body. In Ezekiel 23, Judah and Samaria have their 'virgin bosoms...handled' and their 'breasts pressed' by Egyptians with penises like those of stallions (Ezek. 23.3, 8). In a vitriolic satire in Isaiah 3.16–26, 'mincing' and 'tinkling' women trip up the Judah catwalk, virtually toppling over in all their finery, to be told that God will afflict their heads with scabs and expose their xxxx's (euphemistically translated 'secret parts').⁵¹ Whereas Wisdom enforces the emphatic separation between wise man and the strange woman, prophetic texts document an audacious divine command performance in which a

⁵⁰ See for example Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

⁵¹ In 1 Kings 7.50, the same Hebrew word is used to refer to the sockets in which door pivots turn. As Cheryl Exum observes, the most likely meaning in this context is 'an obscene reference to the woman's vagina'. See J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 105. Jewish interpreters have read similarly. See Ullendorff, *The Bawdy Bible*, 422.

prophet marries a prostitute, or they confront a male audience with the massive gender insult “You are a slut” says the Lord’.

Here, as elsewhere, feminist and gender criticism extends, in its implications, beyond questions of gender. Recent feminist criticism has exposed how the God of the Prophets exerts exclusive possession of, and often brutal domination over, territories-as-women. As Donne, heady on the recent ‘discovery’ of the New World, proclaims his woman his ‘America’, his ‘mine of precious stones’ and his ‘empery’, so the God of the Prophets proclaims the feminised people his exclusive possession, his ‘kingdom’. Monotheism is expressed in tropes of monogamy and an explicitly masculine poetics of the implacable will that brooks no resistance from its addressees. God, prophet and Donne all emphatically and forcefully concur that women (actual and metaphorical) are ‘safeliest when with one man manned’.⁵² This sense of assertion despite the reader/audience or against them is on a direct collision course with understandings of the literary as seducing the reader or appealing to the freedoms, feelings or choices of the reader. The violation of the female body takes us to the very heart of prophetic aesthetics. Improper metaphors, violating decorum, slide seamlessly into actual violation. The abuse of the female body is not a strange blemish on the prophetic corpus so much as a logical extension of ‘masculine persuasive force’.⁵³

I sing not siren-like to tempt, for I
Am harsh.⁵⁴

boasts Donne, bragging of his ‘startling effects’,⁵⁵ his ‘masculine persuasive force’, and his ability to ‘teare/the tender labyrinth of the ear’.⁵⁶ Like Ezekiel, he defines his work against soft, pretty, elegant, feminine

⁵² See the (in)famous stanza from Donne’s Elegy XIX, ‘To His Mistress Going to Bed’:

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
My mine of precious stones, my empery,
How blest I am in this discovering thee!

⁵³ In ‘On His Mistress’ (Elegy XVI) l.4.

⁵⁴ John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters* (ed. W. Milgate; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.

⁵⁵ Edmund Gosse, *The Lives and Letters of John Donne* (1899: 2 vols.) II, p. 68.

⁵⁶ John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, Satire II.

poetry—a description echoed by his detractors and admirers. Thomas Carew described how Donne forcefully bent the ‘stubborne’ ‘tough-thick-rib’d hoops’ of the language as if he were some kind of verbal musclemans or a poetic Mr Universe and spoke of how the poet ‘committed holy rapes upon our wills’.⁵⁷ Coleridge lauded him as ‘rhyme’s sturdy cripple...wreathing iron pokers into true-love knots’, blasting and screwing meanings into place in his sweaty poem-forgery.⁵⁸ Necessary brutality responds to powers that oppose the speaker beyond the poem’s borders. Thus ‘The Canonisation’ opens with peremptory rudeness: ‘For God’s sake, hold your tongue, and let me love’. Images of the poet as one who struggles, battles, wreathes iron pokers or lifts heavy verbal weights call to mind the self-imaging of the prophetic words as swords that slice the people in two and leaden weights that lie heavy on the land (Hos. 6.5; Amos 7.10). Similarly, in the Prophets, force emerges in the context of opposition and is defined and authenticated by opposition. There are always those invisible ones who oppose your will—who will not let you love, and be loved, in the way you desire. There will always be those women/nations who stubbornly do not consent to lie down and be possessed. As in colonial politics and rape so, sometimes, in poetry. Opposing words and bodies that are ‘stout/strong’ or ‘harsh’ against God and the prophet (Malachi 3.13) validate the use of extraordinary force.

It takes a pre-Enlightenment writer like Donne to remind us of the ‘masculine persuasive force’ of the Prophets. Various modern compromises have resulted in aesthetic and political versions of the Bible designed to be far more palatable to late modern readers. Elsewhere I have written of the recent history of the ‘Liberal Bible’, in which the Bible is transformed into a statement of rights and proto-democracy.⁵⁹ Similar transitions take place on the level of aesthetics, producing the self-consciously Literary Bible—a Bible that seeks to *please* the reader

⁵⁷ Carew, ‘Elegie Upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls’ in Clements (ed.), *John Donne’s Poetry*, 139–141.

⁵⁸ See Coleridge’s verse caricature of Donne:
 With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,
 Wreath iron-pokers into true-love knots;
 Rhyme’s sturdy cripple, fancy’s maze and clue,
 Wit’s forge and fire-blast, meaning’s press and screw.
 (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Notes on Donne’, in Clements [ed.], *John Donne’s Poetry*, 145–147 [147]).

⁵⁹ See Sherwood, ‘The God of Abraham and Exceptional States, or the Early Modern Rise of the Whig/Liberal Bible’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76.2 (2008), 312–343.

and that, in its often-emphasised gaps or lacunae, creates space and freedom for the reader: a quasi-democratic space.⁶⁰ Coming from a very different context, prior to the inauguration of these altogether nicer modern Bibles, Donne and his contemporaries have no qualms about articulating what we would now think of, squeamishly, as the violation of the reader, and Donne seems to relish the task of performing the biblical in idioms of masculine incontrovertible force. His sermons extol a deity who can 'blast the State with a breath, melt a Church with a looke, moulder a world with a touch'.⁶¹ As John Carey writes: 'Donne's God is a heavenly powerhouse, with all circuits ablaze. He is an explosion of energy, His eye is hotter than the sun, and melts people... His voice is unimaginably loud... Earthquake, plagues and putride defluxions are in his hand... It is God as killer and pulveriser that John Donne celebrates'.⁶² Even his angels can 'molder' a rock into its 'atoms' with the ease of bodybuilders tearing up telephone directories, and his ministers are 'earthquakes', 'sonnes of thunder', 'waterfalls' and 'lions', appointed to 'shake', 'shatter', 'batter' and 'roar'.⁶³ Recent studies of biblical masculinities could profitably be extended beyond the construction of masculinity (divine and human) into the cross-over between gender and aesthetics. Beyond easy tropes of rhetorical seduction lies the close relationship between violence and a rhetoric of violation. For the Prophets as for Donne, 'language, [and audiences] are there to be fought and forced, not coaxed and wheedled, if one wishes to play the man'.⁶⁴

Broken Names

The Prophets and Donne split identity and security and send meaning ricocheting in all directions in ingenious tricks of language that remind us of Pope's complaint about meanings split in all directions as through a 'prismatic glass'. Donne's contemporary Francis Bacon complained

⁶⁰ For a brief discussion of the attractions of Reader Response criticism, opening up space in the biblical for the freedoms of the reader, see Sherwood, 'Abraham in London, Marburg-Istanbul and Israel: Between Theocracy and Democracy, Ancient Text and Modern State', *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008), 105–153 (122–123).

⁶¹ Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons* IX, 195.

⁶² Carey, *John Donne*, 122–23.

⁶³ Potter and Simpson (ed.), *Sermons* VIII, 106 and VII, 396; Carey, *John Donne*, 122–23.

⁶⁴ Davies, *John Donne*, 32.

that in Donne's writing 'words absolutely force the understanding, and pull all things in confusion.'⁶⁵ Contemporary critic Stevie Davies describes how Donne revels in the 'two-faced, three-angled, and self-multiplying ambiguity of meaning'.⁶⁶ He cuts up and puns on his own name, as if deliberately disturbing the sense of self-possession that accompanies the authorial signature. In what looks like a self-splintering twist on Renaissance self-fashioning,⁶⁷ John Donne describes himself as 'un-Donne', unmade. In 'A Hymn to God the Father,' he writes of what God has done and questions whether God has done/Donne at all. With similar virtuosity, the prophets take the familiar name of a shrine—Gilgal—and smite it into fragments: *hagilgal galoh yigleh* (Amos 5.5–6).⁶⁸ The English translation 'Gilgal shall surely go into exile', fails to capture the sense of the Hebrew word breaking, folding back on itself, and mimicking the destruction of the shrine. Isaiah 5.7 revels in virtual homophones as antitheses. In a prophetic punchline that Fisch, in passing, compares to a 'species of metaphysical wit',⁶⁹ *mishpat* (justice), with the slightest nudge, slides into *mispach* (bloodshed) and *tzedeqah* (righteousness) slips into *tze-aqah* (a cry). In Amos 8.1–3, the prophet sees *qayits*, a 'basket of summer', a vision overflowing with positive connotations. But the true meaning is encrypted. The basket signals, through sound, *qaits*, 'the end', which in turn opens out into the gloss 'women wailing, corpses lying everywhere'. Though elsewhere I have attempted to illustrate this image with the assistance of René Magritte,⁷⁰ in this context we could readily imagine it alongside Caravaggio's visual pun on *ramarro* (lizard) and *amaro* (love) in 'Boy Bitten by a Lizard' (1595)—another example of the aesthetics of the baroque. A seeming vision turns out to be an 'auracle', an avisual vision, a non-revelatory revelation, in which an appeal to the eye is a decoy for the real (hidden) target, which is the ear.

⁶⁵ Francis Bacon, *The 'Novum Organum Scientiarum'* (trans. and ed. Dr Shaw; London: 1880), p. 7.

⁶⁶ Stevie Davies, *John Donne* (London: Northcote House, 1994), p. 5.

⁶⁷ For a now classic statement on Renaissance self-fashioning, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁶⁸ I am using rough transliteration to convey a sense of the sound of the word to non-Hebrew speakers.

⁶⁹ Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 6.

⁷⁰ See Sherwood 'Of Fruit and Corpses and Wordplay Visions: Picturing Amos 8.1–3', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 92 (2001), 5–27.

An Augustan poet or a Wisdom writer never uses riddles or witticisms without giving the clues or context necessary for the witty or Wise to decipher them. In 'The Rape of the Lock', Alexander Pope ingeniously quips that 'the tortoise here and Elephant unite/ Transform'd to combs, the speckled and the white'—but makes it clear that he is talking about the combs on Belinda's dressing table.⁷¹ In Wisdom literature as in Augustan poetry, riddle is an ingenious overlay on the surface of what exists; it does not tamper with what exists. In the Prophets, in contrast, riddles deliberately obfuscate and occlude interpretation. They do not simply lie over the surface of what is as an ingenious example of seeing otherwise. Rather, poetic distortions go all the way down into ontology and epistemology and radically distort what is.

Opening with the 'The words of Amos... which he saw' (Amos. 1.2), the book of Amos highlights the permeable border between writing and graphics in the Prophets. Emerging from a context where writing was still rare and strange, the prophetic words are haunted by a sense of novelty, numinous magical power and a potency to make things happen.⁷² Thus when the Prophets indulge in the same kind of 'literary pyrotechnics'⁷³ that characterise Donne's writing, worlds change. When words are uncertain, worlds are uncertain, as are God's sympathies. 'Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned' God tells the prophet Jonah, using the same verb used of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But it turns out that the word that he uses, 'to overturn', is itself to be overturned. Nineveh is to be turned around, in the sense of saved, but also turned around in the sense that Nineveh is to become the hyper-pious nation, described using terms applied to Jerusalem from Judah/Israel's own texts.⁷⁴ In the book of Hosea, conversely, one of Israel's names, Ephraim, is split and pulled in all directions to turn into healing (7.1), adulterers and the baker who heats the oven of their lust (7.4), a wild ass (8.9), fruit (9.16) and the 'flourishing' of the marsh plants that shrivel under the hot desert wind (13.15). The name, like the nation, is volatile, subject to entropy.⁷⁵ Even the anchor for the nation, Yhwh,

⁷¹ Cf. Murray Roston, *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 10.

⁷² On the numinous power of writing, see William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 24–34.

⁷³ Davies, *John Donne*, 24.

⁷⁴ Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117–118; 259–267.

⁷⁵ Cf. Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 146.

becomes most extremely not himself as the one whose name is 'I Am/I Will Be' declares 'I will not be/ I am not for you the I am' (Hos. 1.8).

Donne and the Prophets seek not simply to change words, but to find the point where they turn into, and collide with, their opposite. Donne is enthralled rather than 'vexed' when 'contraries meet in one'.⁷⁶ He revels in the accident of the calendar that causes the Annunciation and the Passion to fall on the same day. This gives him the pretext for contemplating a Mary 'who at almost fifty and scarce fifteen' listens to the angels' *Ave* and *Consummation Est* and for revelling in the ultimate conjunction-disjunction between life and death.⁷⁷ Four key anthems return repeatedly in his writing: 'mutabilitie' (where the 'world changes and melts in all parts thereof'); alchemy (the impossible conversion); 'mummy' (the powder of mummified corpses stocked by Elizabethan apothecaries where death and healing meet in the same substance); and maps because 'in a flat map, there goes no more, to make West East, though they be distant in extremity, but to paste that flat Map upon a round body, and so West and East are all one'.⁷⁸ Donne's sermons betray a fascination with the 'mutabilitie' and 'fluidnesse' of all temporal things: the way in which 'Ayre condensed becomes water, a more solid body, And Ayre rarified becomes fire, a body more disputable and in-apparent', or the way in which man 'melts so away, as if he were a statue not of earth, but of snow'.⁷⁹ Similarly Prophecy envisages the dissipation of humankind and conjures meltdowns and alchemies on a grand scale where the streams turn to pitch, soil to brimstone (Isa. 34.9), the moon turns to blood (Joel 2.31), the mountains quake, the hills melt (Nah. 1.5) and the valleys melt like wax before the fire (Mic. 1.4). As Donne loves to run the healing corpse-powder through his fingers, so the book of Amos revels in the disjunction of fruit and death, or the paradox of sheol-as-place-of-refuge, or the mutation of the 'day of the Lord' (a trope for salvation) into a day of destruction (Amos 4.12–13; 5.8,18–20; 9.2,7–8,10). And all this takes place within a book whose framing message is (and Donne would love this), impossibly, 'You are dead'.⁸⁰ The prophets, like Donne, are concerned with

⁷⁶ Cf. Holy Sonnet 17, ll. 1–2.

⁷⁷ 'Upon the Annunciation and the Passion Falling Upon One Day. 1608.'

⁷⁸ Potter and Simpson (eds.), *The Sermons* vi, 59.

⁷⁹ See Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons* VII, 259, 271; cf. III, 227 and IX, 305.

⁸⁰ Cf. Yvonne Sherwood and John D. Caputo, 'Otobiographies, or How a Torn and Disembodied Ear Hears a Promise of Death' in Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (eds.), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 209–239.

arranging perverse meetings between extremes and with re-pasting and re-folding the cartography of the imagination. Amos, the book set in and over the earthquake, the book that seems to send seismic shifts through the security of perception, audaciously speaks of the 'Exodus' of the Ethiopians, Philistines and Arameans. The book takes the theological world map and refolds it so that Israel is in the same place as the Philistines, the Ethiopians and the Assyrians (Amos 9.7). In a more conceptually reassuring, but equally geographically unsettling, oracle in which the enemy is sent, impossibly, westwards and eastwards, Joel 2.20 promises 'I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his front into the eastern sea, and his rear into the western sea'. The geographical conundrum is also an existential conundrum for the enemy is to be eliminated by being drowned and by being parched.

For Donne, contortions of space and perspective are tied to distinctly early modern events such as the invention of the telescope, the Copernican Revolution and the encounter with the so-called 'New World'. He famously described the 'New Philosophy' that 'arrests the Sunne/ And bids the passive earth about it runne', and his sermons frequently invoke the jolted 'settlednesse' of the earth.⁸¹ Though prophetic poetry is hardly reeling from the invention of the telescope, it nevertheless teems with optical distorting effects in which men appear as grasshoppers and the world, imagined through a God's-eye lens, becomes a giant bird's nest, plundered by God for its wealth eggs (Isa. 40.22; Isa. 10.14). The world is re-envisaged through the eye of God: perhaps an even more radically decentring force than the Copernican Revolution. Peripheral, tiny and pathetic, the land becomes a mere hut in a cucumber field and a fragile structure that quakes and breaks and crumbles and lurches and sways like a drunk (Isa. 1.8; Isa. 24.19–20).

Towards an Aesthetics of Prophecy

One of the reasons why Donne's poetry earned the epithet 'metaphysical' was because it was deemed abstruse, impenetrable and so, in a certain joking sense, divine. James I quipped that his work was 'like the Peace of God' because it 'passeth understanding'.⁸² Jokes apart, the concept

⁸¹ 'To the Countesse of Bedford' and Potter and Simpson (eds.), *Sermons*, VII, 234.

⁸² Cit. Smith, *John Donne*, 74.

of the 'metaphysical' conceit and the strange Donne-Prophets analogy can help us to articulate the logic of prophetic literature as a particular aesthetic bound to a particular theology: an understanding of the divine as that made elusively manifest in radical contortions of the word. The Prophets answer the question 'What would the voice of God sound like?' with the answer 'Like our language, but radically re-orientated, shocked, startled, pulverised'. The voice of God is heard not as strange tongues, foreign languages, glossolalia, entirely beyond our access and comprehension—though this is one obvious idiom for the Holy. Rather, the voice of the Prophetic God takes us close as we can possibly come to strange tongues within 'our' language—a home language of which prophetic literature makes us feel radically dispossessed. In the Wisdom tradition, theological and poetic truth come together in the expression of the inner harmony of what 'is'. In the Prophets, theological and poetic truth come together in the splitting of that which 'is'. God is made manifest in the irruption of the implausible, the incredible, the sinful and the transgressive in 'our' language. Incredulity and recoil are taken as the marker of his presence. Implausible and improbable metaphorical relations do not simply express the effects of sin through a poetics of transgression. Rather a poetics of absolute transgression defines the voice of God itself.

PART II

NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES: CROSSINGS AND DEFINING
THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

Andrew Rippin

Readers of religious texts are, by definition, involved in exploring boundaries and, in doing so, are always asking the question of what it means to be human. In fact, one might suggest that the very notion of God has arisen in order to facilitate this exploration. The idea of the existence of God appears to respond to a fundamental dilemma provoked by the experience of being human: the separation of the inside from the outside. The deep sense of isolation that the self experiences in human existence is overcome by the overarching divinity from which all existence stems. The boundaries which serve to define our 'selves' are somehow subsumed by the notion of a divine being which both reflects the qualities of human existence (God as the male king-warrior-judge) and asserts a reality of infinite eternity in which boundaries dissolve.

What makes this difficult, however, but what makes the challenge for the reader of the texts exciting, is the fact of language. In postulating the divine and making it accessible, God itself becomes embedded in human experience and expression, whether that be the text of scripture or the conception of an individual human (as with Jesus). And as soon as that expression of and about the divine is placed in language, the reality becomes tangible and the grounding of those expressions in metaphor seems to fade. Religion, in this way, becomes a matter centrally focussed on language: we only have words with which to overcome the boundaries and to define who we are, but we can only ever do so through metaphor. Language is not, cannot be in any way, the actual 'thing' of which it speaks. It can only represent. The difference between 'reality' and the human attempt to capture it will always remain. And when the 'thing' which we try to describe is defined inherently as non-human, even beyond human, then even more so will that be the case. In the paradox of the attempt, however, comes the genius of religion in its postulating of the existence of something 'beyond' language while recognizing that language is always other than of whatever it speaks. The divine pushes the notion of language out to its 'logical' paradoxical end. The attempt to bridge that paradox is then to be seen in scripture as a record of 'divine speech' and/or in the idea of the speaking man

who is also divine. But, too, there is the human tendency to simply ignore metaphor and make the text real. This is especially the case in the hermeneutics of the monotheist traditions in which the idea of the 'inner' and the 'outer' meaning of worldly phenomena, including that of scriptural texts, is postulated. This dichotomy becomes deployed as a tool in the hands of the skilful exegete, the invocation of the 'outer' meaning being a ready solution to the repudiation of a no-longer-accepted sense of a text. Base human isolation and alienation remains, unresolved by the existence of scripture.

So, the boundaries remain. Transgressing the boundaries set up by the textualization and institutionalization of the traditions in order to re-invigorate the concept of the divine then becomes one of the tasks of the inventive reader. Søren Kierkegaard, for example, recognized the dilemma of even making the attempt to transgress in his speaking of "mysteries" and "keys"; for him, every additional key only opens yet another drawer inside the desk, reality never to be pinned down. George Aichele's creative reading of the meaning of "the gospels" in the context of the canon of the Bible points to another metaphor to explain the same thing: here, the concepts of 'original' and 'copy' are thrown into disarray, leaving no point at which to grasp 'reality'. But to most people, it seems, the message does not get through: the ordinary reader creates one out of the many; even the scholar reconstructs history to resolve difference.

The record of this tangle is, in fact, everywhere in sight: the attempt to bring God into the realm of the human in the Genesis story as recounted by Marvin Sweeney, the transformation of Lilith from goddess to demon expounded by Beth McDonald, or the modelling of the prophets as reflective of human existence as spoken of by Marianna Klar all show the means by which the conception of the divine becomes transformed by the reader's need to understand shifting boundaries in human existence as shadowed by the divine realm. Reading is an inventive enterprise.

In modern discussions hardly any word has become as fraught as the 'other', the concerns about it perhaps stemming from the shadows of angst about political correctness. The tendency to objectify the other, to reduce the boundaries to something which can be owned, manipulated and rendered powerless over the self, make those boundaries locations of political and ideological struggles. We see this in the figure of God—the wholly other—who becomes made in the image of the human through the vehicle of language. The essays in this section also display

the way in which the attentive reader can uncover those constructions in order to undo their power over us. What remains after doing so, however, becomes the larger issue: once one crosses to the other side of the street expecting it to be sunnier, darkness still eventually falls there too. The act of re-reading must be a continual one, therefore, as the religious traditions have always emphasized in their ideas of orality and liturgy; in this way the text stays alive, always able to respond to human concerns of the day. Our modern age seems to have made the issues so very pressing, but the consequence of the concerns often seem more apocalyptic than even post-modern prose will allow. As the sense of meaning becomes ever more unstable, rather than relish both the freedom and the responsibility that is thereby provided, many people seem to push harder for the firmness of authority and the absoluteness of existence in that tendency we have come to term universally fundamentalism. Exploring boundaries is all about avoiding that abyss.

JESUS SIMULACRUM, OR THE GOSPELS VS. "THE GOSPEL"¹

George Aichele

Four Jesuses

If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another model, a model of the Other, from which there flows an internalized dissemblance.²

The Christian New Testament begins with four gospels, each of which tells a different story of Jesus. Or rather, each gospel tells a story of a different Jesus. Each of these Jesuses has disciples named Peter, James, and John. Each gospel's Jesus speaks enigmatically but provocatively and also performs miracles, and each one is crucified by the Romans and resurrected from the dead. These are certainly striking similarities. Nevertheless, any careful reader will note that these four Jesuses are deeply incompatible. In effect, each gospel asks a different question, to which it gives the answer, 'Jesus'.³ However, the four questions are so different from each other that the answers are too, even though the name is always the same.

The identity of each Jesus is different from the others. Matthew's Jesus is a second Moses who emphasizes the law (5:17–20), and after his resurrection he receives authority and is worshipped by his followers (28:9, 17–20). Luke's Jesus is the "Lord" (1:76, 2:11, 7:13, etc.), who belongs from the beginning in his (divine) "Father's house" (2:49),⁴ and who is comfortable even on the cross (23:43, 46). Luke's Jesus shares these features with John's Jesus (see 2:16, 14:2, 19:28–30), but John's Jesus alone is the incarnate divine Word through whom all things were made (1:3, 14). In contrast, Mark's alleged 'messianic secret' only makes sense if the reader has already read Matthew, Luke, or John, and thus

¹ This essay is an abridged version of a paper presented at the Bible and Critical Theory session of the international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Auckland, New Zealand, July 2008.

² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 258.

³ See Roland Barthes's discussion of the hermeneutic code, in *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 19.

⁴ All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

already expects that a gospel will present Jesus as the messiah. Mark's Jesus is either an inept keeper of secrets, or else there is no secret, but merely profound obscurity (11:33).

Some differences between these four Jesuses appear in chunks of narrative that are unique to or absent from one of the gospels, such as birth or childhood stories, resurrection appearances, lengthy discourses, or specific miracles or parables. Other differences appear in irreconcilable disparities between the gospels' discussions of Jesus's relations to God, Israel, the gentiles, or his family or followers. Still other differences appear in significant variations in Jesus's language, such as his reply to Peter at Caesarea Philippi, or to the high priest at his trial, or his last words on the cross.

Each Jesus has a mother, whose name is Mary in the synoptics but who is unnamed in John, although in that gospel her sister is named Mary (19:25). Only Matthew and Luke narrate Christmas stories, and there are important differences between the two accounts. In both stories, Mary is a virgin and her husband is Joseph, but all of the other details vary. Jesus is born in a house (Matthew 2:11) or he is laid in a manger (Luke 2:7). Joseph requires angelic intervention in Matthew (1:20–21), but it is Mary who talks to the angel in Luke (1:28–38). John agrees with Matthew and Luke that Jesus's human father is Joseph, and John's mystical prologue (1:1–18) serves a theological function not unlike that of the Christmas stories, but John's account is far less 'fleshy' than the other two. Despite their considerable differences, all three of these stories make it much clearer than Mark ever does that Jesus actually is 'the son of God', clarifying the meaning of that phrase. Mark lacks a birth story, and Mark's reference to Jesus as the "son of Mary" (6:3, compare Luke 4:22) suggests that Jesus's birth was not only quite natural but also illegitimate, and that his father was unknown.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus preaches the 'kingdom of God' (or 'heaven' in Matthew), often in parables that present the kingdom as a secret. In contrast, in John the phrase 'kingdom of God' appears only in Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus, where it is associated with being "born anew" (3:3, 5). In all three synoptics, Jesus explains his use of parables by quoting Isaiah 6:9–10, but with significant differences. Mark 4:11–12 and Luke 8:10 follow the Greek text of Isaiah closely, and according to them, Jesus speaks in parables *so that (hina)* "those outside" will not understand. Jesus's parables are not invitations but obstacles to repentance and belief. Matthew 13:13 rewrites Isaiah and

eliminates the harshness of Jesus's saying, and as a result, he tells parables *because* (*hoti*) the crowd does not understand. John's Jesus has his own unique collection of mystical 'I am' sayings, he speaks in 'figures' instead of parables, and John 9:39 completely transforms the saying from Isaiah.

Jesus's relations to his disciples and to his family are stormy throughout Mark. Even though they are 'insiders', the disciples often do not understand Jesus and are sometimes hostile (8:32–33), and his family thinks that he is crazy (3:21). Nevertheless, outsiders understand him rather well (12:12, 28–34). As a result, Mark's distinction between outsiders and insiders becomes paradoxical. In contrast, the disciples have no difficulty understanding Jesus in Matthew, Luke, or John, and these gospels omit any parallel to Mark 3:21 (however, see John 10:20).

In each of the gospels, Jesus speaks often about a 'son of man', a common phrase in the Jewish scriptures. 'The son of man' in Jesus's words is usually understood to connote Jesus himself, understood as a unique being with a special relation to God, but Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the son of man only in John 9:36–37. In contrast, in Mark 3:28, "the sons of men" are not only sinners and blasphemers, but also plural. Although the phrase 'son of man' in Jesus's words may refer uniquely to Jesus in the other gospels, it cannot do so in Mark. The context of Mark 3:28 suggests that these multiple sons of men are the crowd sitting about Jesus, whom he calls his "brother and sister and mother" (3:35). These sons of men may include Jesus among their number, but they are not innocent, unique saviors. They are ordinary human beings, which is what 'son of man' usually connotes in the Jewish scriptures. Luke and John omit and Matthew rewrites (12:31) the saying in Mark 3:28, obliterating the plural, sinful sons of men. Indeed, in Matthew 12:48–49, it is the disciples, not the crowd, who are Jesus's "mother and brothers".

Jesus's time in the wilderness and his temptation by Satan is absent from John's gospel and occupies only a single verse in Mark, but this story is narrated in great detail in both Matthew and Luke, in versions that are nearly identical and that emphasize Jesus's rejection of Satan's offers. In contrast, Mark never clearly states that Jesus did not succumb to temptation and even hints that he might be "possessed by Beelzebul" (3:22). John too suggests the possibility that Jesus has a "demon" (7:20, 8:52, 10:20), although John's Jesus explicitly denies that this is true (8:48, cf. 10:21). Mark's Jesus does not. Each of the gospels

associates numerous miracles with Jesus, but sometimes in Mark it is not clear whether a miracle has been performed at all, or who controls the miraculous powers (5:22–43), or by whom the miracle has been performed (7:25–30). Thus Jesus's relation to the supernatural remains unclear. Matthew and Luke offer slightly different stories that emphasize Jesus's supernatural powers and his ability to use them. John has its own distinct miracle stories: 'signs' that lead the witnesses to believe in Jesus's close relationship to God. In contrast, in the synoptic gospels, Jesus's miracles do not cause others to believe in him but instead result from their faith.

The gospels all conclude with passion and resurrection stories. Both Mark's and Matthew's Jesuses are unwilling to die in Gethsemane, and each one cries out at the moment of his death: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). In sharp contrast, Luke's Jesus's final words are "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (23:46), and John's Jesus says serenely, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Both Luke and John present Jesus as calm and assured, both in the garden (except for Luke 22:43–44, missing in the oldest manuscripts) and on the cross, where he promises to be with the faithful thief "today in paradise" (Luke 23:43, cf. also 23:34 and John 19:26–27). These two Jesuses know all along where they are going.

According to Mark 16:8, the women at the tomb "said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." However, if the women said nothing to anyone, then Mark's story of the empty tomb and the young man's words to them were never told to any others. Because these matters evidently are being 'told' to others in the text of Mark itself, that gospel implies that its story is fictitious. John's gospel also has a problem with its ending(s), but there the problem is not a failure of denotation, but rather a super-abundance. According to John 21:25, "were every one of [the things Jesus did] to be written . . . the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." After the crucifixion, Matthew records a spectacular albeit sketchy Easter story, and Luke-Acts narrates more extensive encounters between the disciples and Jesus after the resurrection. Both Matthew and Luke-Acts reduce the evident fictionality of the story and bring it to a definitive and triumphal end, although again in significantly different ways. Nevertheless, each of these gospels underlines Jesus's supernatural power and make it clear that he has not only risen from the grave but has met with the disciples and given them authority to create a universal church.

Reality Effect

Simulation is precisely this irresistible unfolding, this linkage of things as if they had a meaning, so that they are no longer controlled or regulated except by artificial montage and non-sense.⁵

There are many more differences between the four Jesuses of the biblical gospels. These differences between the gospel Jesuses with their distinct stories cannot be resolved into differences of minor detail, narrative gaps in one gospel that are filled in others, or trivial variations in sequence. They cannot be reduced to differences of historical or theological perspective on some single reality. Lurking beneath the numerous differences between the four Jesuses, and producing many of them, are deeper and more important differences. As a more-or-less realistic, or 'readerly', narrative,⁶ each gospel creates a referential illusion or 'reality effect'. The reality effect of a particular text may not denote the lived reality of the reader, and this may be quite explicit (e.g., in fantastical texts), but even then there will be some relation to the 'reality principle' in relation to which the reader's self and her world are constructed.⁷ According to Roland Barthes, "the 'real' is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent."⁸ As this language suggests and as Barthes demonstrates, the effect of the real arises when codes of denotation dominate the reading of a text. "Denotation 'translates' reality," Barthes says⁹—that is, realism is the fictional illusion of reality, and "the real is never anything but a meaning."¹⁰ Ideology congeals and is embodied in the reality effect.

The reality effect in the case of each gospel is a meaningful story about a seemingly-real person named Jesus. Each of the four gospels

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "Strike of Events." *Critical Theory* (<<http://www.ctheory.net/default.asp#Articles>>), article 9, 1992, excerpt from *L'illusion de la fin*, Charles Dudas, trans. Accessed September 4, 2004.

⁶ Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

⁷ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 98–100.

⁸ *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 139.

⁹ *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 174.

¹⁰ Barthes, *Rustle*, 140.

produces a different reality effect, and thus a different virtual Jesus. These various reality effects are 'given' to the reader; she alone does not produce them, and thus she cannot impose on each story whatever perspective she wants, any more than she can choose to make the story signify whatever she wants. However, these effects are not simply 'there' in the texts. They are the products of intertextual negotiations between reader and text—that is, 'reality' is the effect of reading codes through which the reader deciphers each text. Thus although the gospels' reality effects are profoundly subjective phenomena and vary from one reader to another, distinctions between them are not simply made up, and cannot be wished away. The differences between the four Jesuses are quite 'real', despite the subjectivity of the reader.

As reality effects, the four Jesuses are simulacra, which is not the same thing as multiple copies of a single historical model or original entity. According to Gilles Deleuze,

The simulacrum is the instance which includes a difference within itself, such as (at least) two divergent series on which it plays, all resemblance abolished so that one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy.¹¹

In other words, the simulacrum is the product both of a semiotic system and of the deconstruction of that system.¹²

The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*. . . . The simulacrum functions in such a way that a certain resemblance is necessarily thrown back onto its basic series and a certain identity projected on the forced movement.¹³

Deleuze's "certain resemblance and identity" form the reality effect. The simulacrum is the afterlife that creates its precursor, "an imitation more real somehow than that which it emulates"¹⁴—in other words, it is the effect which produces reality by simulating it. The simulacrum

¹¹ *Difference*, 69.

¹² Compare Frege: "combinations of symbols can occur that seem to mean something but (at least so far) do not mean anything, e.g. divergent infinite series," *Translations From the Writings of Gottlob Frege*, trans. and ed. P.T. Geach and M. Black (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1952), 70, see also 32–33. Frege's examples include "apparent proper names" and metaphors. According to Deleuze, the simulacrum or phantasm has three forms: theological, oneiric, and erotic (*Logic*, 275–276).

¹³ Deleuze, *Logic*, 262, 265, his emphases.

¹⁴ William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003), 11.

is not an illusion or image, but instead it deconstructs the opposition between reality and representation.¹⁵ As Jacques Derrida says, "this very simulacrum still bears witness to a possibility which exceeds it."¹⁶

In contrast to the modernist concept of the copy or representation, which always implies an antecedent original, the simulacrum is accompanied by the vertigo associated with the endless flow of semiosis.¹⁷ For the simulacrum, there is no Final Signified, no ground to the abyss of meaning. The vertigo of the simulacrum extends beyond denotation and its reality effects to connotation and the plural text, or in other words, from the readerly to the 'writerly' text.¹⁸ Barthes argues that "denotation is not the truth of discourse: ... [denotation is] a particular, specialized substance used by the other [connotative] codes to smooth their articulation."¹⁹ Denotation must always be negotiated and controlled, but connotation is meaning running wild, the force behind what Umberto Eco, following C.S. Peirce, calls "unlimited semiosis."²⁰ For connotation, there is no proper or firm connection between meaning and language. Meaning is not located 'in' any individual text, but rather it flows between texts and readers, and thus between texts and other texts.

The reader must work harder to make sense of writerly texts—that is, to direct and contain their connotations—and ideological influence on reading becomes more evident, as a result. Denotation secures the plurality of the Bible's Jesuses, but connotation opens up a writerly plurality *within* each Jesus. Each of the gospels' Jesuses is a "partial object,"²¹ in both senses of the word 'partial' (incomplete, biased). According to Barthes, "As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun) to flow toward and fasten onto, the semes become predicates, inductors of truth, and the Name becomes a subject."²² In each gospel, the name of Jesus becomes a hook on which the story hangs various predicates. These predicates establish character, plot, and meaning, and they may appear, change,

¹⁵ Deleuze, *Logic*, 265–266.

¹⁶ *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 30. On the relation between Deleuze's and Derrida's understandings of the simulacrum, see the essays in Paul Patton and John Protevi, eds., *Between Deleuze and Derrida* (London: Continuum Books, 2003).

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Logic*, 262.

¹⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

¹⁹ *S/Z*, 128.

²⁰ *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 15.

²¹ Deleuze, *Difference*, 100.

²² *S/Z*, 191.

or disappear at any moment. Each gospel's Jesus is simulated through a series of signifiers, and as Deleuze says, "Each series tells a story: not different points of view on the same story, ...but completely distinct stories which unfold simultaneously."²³

Mark's Jesus, compared to Matthew's or Luke's Jesuses, is a disturbing fellow, one who boggles his followers' (and others') minds, for he continually threatens to become many: Christ, son of God, son of man, son of Mary, carpenter, Beelzebul. John's Jesus also boggles the mind, but in a very different way, as God incarnate, the witnessed Word: he is incomprehensible, like the square root of minus one. The flow of semiosis is more evident in relatively writerly texts such as Mark or John than it is in relatively readerly texts such as Matthew or Luke. Nevertheless, what may be more evident in relation to Mark or John is true also, but in more subtle ways, for these other gospels. As Barthes demonstrates, even the most readerly text becomes writerly, if read closely. Each gospel's Jesus then becomes a partial object, on the verge of coming apart.

Canon and 'The Gospel'

Abolish the possibility of the simulacrum and of external repetition, and you abolish the possibility both of the law and of duty themselves, that is, of their recurrence.²⁴

The biblical gospels tell four different stories of four different Jesuses, simulacra whose divergences are overcome or ignored in Christian ideology. The Bible, as the canon of the scriptures, functions as a great trope, absorbing these differences into a single identity and creating 'the Gospel', for which there is only one 'real' Jesus, who is the Christ or Son of God, the Lord and Savior, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'trope' as a "figure of speech which consists in the use of a word or phrase in a sense other than that which is proper to it."²⁵ The Bible is not a figure of speech, but as a canon, it does give its constituent texts 'another sense'.

²³ *Difference*, 123.

²⁴ Derrida, *Name*, 142.

²⁵ John Simpson, et al., eds., *Oxford English Dictionary* CD-ROM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The canon is an exercise of the power to control the meaning of the scriptures. It performs what Roman Jakobson called the metalingual function, which is to identify the proper codes for understanding the text.²⁶ The canon produces its own reality effect.

That the books of the Bible are all usually bound together in a single codex encourages people to read them as a single book with a proper sequence. The codex makes it possible to publish four gospels (and the other biblical writings) in one physical volume, like the chapters of a single book. The codex assembles an explicit intertextual network in a format that can be easily used. The single codex of the Christian Bible signifies the overcoming or even the non-existence of problems associated with the evident differences, both of text and of meaning, between the gospels.

However, the canonical reality effect is not simply the result of the technology of codex. The primary value and function of the canon is ideological. For those who believe that the Bible is 'the Word of God,' all of the biblical books speak clearly together. The reality effect produced through the canon does not appear in the individual texts themselves but rather in the ways in which the biblical texts are juxtaposed with one another and held together in the interpretive practice of the faithful reader. As Yvonne Sherwood says, "A deeply ingrained cultural sense of the Bible as the 'Word of God,' or at the very least a homogeneous canon, means that we expect that separate textual voices will be gathered into a single consciousness.... This book, of all books, is expected to process life into a gigantic metanarrative, to frame the world in a Great, all-encompassing Code."²⁷ For Christian faith, the Bible is understood to transmit a single message with a single meaning. Therefore the four gospels also must refer to a single truth. In order to maintain the four gospels side by side in the Bible, the four virtual objects named Jesus must be absorbed without remainder into a single virtual object, who is often called 'Jesus Christ'. The different simulacra of the four gospels' Jesuses disappear when they are transformed into multiple copies of one model, who is the 'real' Jesus of the Gospel, Jesus Christ.

²⁶ *Language and Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 69.

²⁷ *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: the Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 217.

The inclusion of multiple gospels in the New Testament does not encourage diversity, as many people claim, but rather it *subjects* diversity to a greater unity.²⁸ Thus Matthew is often called ‘the Gospel *According to* (Saint) Matthew’, and so forth, for the gospels are understood to be four versions of one story. The fact that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only gospels within the Christian Bible serves to control the meaning of each one of them. The physical location of the gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, and the important similarities between them, encourages the reader to think that these books belong together and to read each one of them in light of the other three. The reader reads them all as a single story, and thereby the writerly becomes more readerly.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that a collection consisting of only the four gospels would have been sufficient to establish the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such collections evidently did exist prior to the formation of the Christian canon, but they weren’t enough. In order to secure the identity of the gospels’ meaning, something more was required, and that ‘something more’ appears in other New Testament texts²⁹ and especially the letters of Paul, where the use of the word ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*) deeply influences understanding of the meaning of that word, and thus of the gospel texts.

Indeed, in Paul’s writings, the Gospel of Jesus Christ appears. The word ‘gospel’ appears more often in the letters of Paul than in the entire rest of the Bible, but Paul does not use this word to designate the kind of story that appears in the gospel texts. He is either uninterested in or unaware of the words and deeds of Jesus. For Paul, the word ‘gospel’ designates a central element in his own thought, the content of the message that he preaches. Paul defines the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith” (Romans 1:16). “The gospel” acquires a supernatural status in Paul’s letters, where it is associated with mystery and power: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of *Jesus Christ*” (Galatians 1:11–12, emphasis added). It is

²⁸ Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 24–35, 88.

²⁹ The Old Testament, the Christian name for and appropriation of the Jewish scriptures, also helps to identify the Gospel, but again, a collection of only the Old Testament and the four gospels would not have been sufficient for that purpose.

in this sense that Paul preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is far more likely than any of the gospels to conjoin 'Jesus' with 'Christ' or 'the Lord'. In Paul's writings, the simulacrum that is Jesus Christ has absorbed Jesus, so much so that Jesus can hardly be considered a virtual object in them.

The Christian canon of the New Testament collects the four gospels, places them in a sequence, and follows them almost immediately with a collection of Paul's letters. In effect, the canon quotes each gospel text word for word and thereby transforms it into an organ of a larger entity that includes Paul's writings, among others. The canon obscures the physical texts themselves with something else, a signified or at least a signifying potential that far surpasses any of them. The result of canonizing is not a physical rewriting that transforms or replaces the materiality of the signifier, but it changes the signifier anyway, because it changes the signification. In this way, the canon 'tropes' the gospels.

The canon creates its own reality effect by negating the diverse reality effects of the gospels, obliterating their differences and transforming them into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus it 'translates' and unifies the language of the various texts.³⁰ The resulting Gospel is no longer simply a story but a revelation from God, a message that brings salvation for those who believe it. The Gospel replaces the four different Jesus simulacra with another simulacrum, a Jesus Christ who is then projected through the canon upon the various gospels as the theological object of readers' beliefs and desires.

Belief that there is only one Jesus Christ (and thus disbelief in the gospels' many Jesuses) is essential to orthodox Christian thought, and it has been ever since the canonization of the Bible. Indeed, without this belief, four gospels would not have been admitted into the canon. Other factors are also at work in the production of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: creeds, catechisms, homilies, etc. It is surely no coincidence that the Christian canon of the Bible and the Nicene Creed are both products of the fourth century, the same period in which Christianity was transformed from a diverse array of marginal groups into a united, imperial church. The Gospel makes possible the canon, and vice versa.

For the last two hundred years, scholarly biblical criticism has attempted to resolve the differences between the four Jesuses through hypotheses describing trajectories of traditions about one actual man,

³⁰ Gamble, *Canon*, 14, 75.

Jesus, in the form of first oral, then written texts produced by a wide variety of early 'Jesus communities' and reflecting the differing beliefs of those communities. Lurking behind many of these investigations has been the belief that it is possible in some degree to recover from behind these traditions the truth about this one man. These biblical scholars accept the canonical reality effect and assume that the gospels serve as four accounts of a single historical truth, four compatible points of view, not unlike stories of a single event in different newspapers. Although distortion results from the historical process and the differences between emerging theologies, between the four denotations of reality in the biblical gospels there can be no serious incompatibility, merely differences of emphasis or minor discrepancies of description.

The resulting reconstruction of who Jesus really was is yet another simulacrum. 'The historical Jesus' functions much like the narrative harmonizations of the gospels that began with the second-century Christian, Tatian. Tatian's harmony was eventually condemned by the early church, but such harmonizations are still popular among Christians today, and they often take the form of novels or movies about the life of Jesus that piece together the diverse texts as though they narrated a single story. They too reconstruct 'the historical Jesus'. The net effect in each case is a super-gospel, perhaps not unlike Paul's 'gospel', which in any case owes much to the canonical Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Insofar as it has 'worked', the Bible has created the illusion of a self-contained whole, a single, seamless text that conveys the clear, already well-known message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, the Christian canon is at best a partial success. The codex allows the reader to skip back and forth between the different biblical books. This not only encourages the harmonizing of the stories, but it also brings to light instabilities within the collection, conflicts between the gospels (and other texts) that would be mere inconsistencies in a non-canonical collection. Any careful reader is aware of the conflicts, but only to the extent that the canon has failed to trope the texts.

In contrast, to read the Bible as the coherent Word of God is to smooth over differences of narrative and implication between the various gospels and to resolve them into a greater truth. The canon then legitimizes certain understandings of the texts and delegitimizes others; it controls the way that the Bible is read. It turns four different gospels into the one Gospel, and it turns four different simulacra who share the name of Jesus into the one simulacrum who is the Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Savior and Son of God.

HUMAN~DIVINE COMMUNICATION AS A PARADIGM
FOR POWER: AL-THA‘LABĪ’S PRESENTATION OF
Q. 38:24 AND Q. 38:34

Marianna Klar

Verses 24 to 25 of sura 38 (*Ṣād*) of the Qur’an tell us *David realized that We had been testing him, so he asked forgiveness of his Lord, fell down on his knees, and repented: We forgave him [his misdeed]. His reward will be nearness to Us, a good place to return to;*¹ verses 34 to 35 of the same sura tell us *We certainly tested Solomon, reducing him to a mere skeleton on the throne. He turned to Us and prayed: ‘Lord, forgive me! Grant me such power as no one after me will have—You are the Most Generous Provider’,* then, at verse 40, *His reward will be nearness to Us, a good place to return to.* Both passages mention a God-given trial, the repentance of a prophet, and the reward of *nearness to Us, a good place to return to.* Yet the medieval Muslim historiographical tradition presents very different narratives, and very different personalities, in elucidation of these two episodes. The two questions that will be addressed in this essay are: restricting our focus to communication patterns and how God is presented in the narrative, how do these two narratives differ? And, secondly, can we find reasons in the text of the Qur’anic passages themselves for why they differ?

Muslim historiography constructs a (strictly non-canonical) salvation history, built out of a series of anecdotes regarding the pre-Islamic prophets, some independently authored and some re-worded by the compiler of the history, all arranged in a loosely chronological pattern.² Many of these anecdotes posit contradictory versions of events, and this

¹ Translations of the Qur’an are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Qur’an: A New Translation*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

² Comprehensive information on the pre-Islamic prophets can be found in the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* of ‘Umāra b. Wathima (d. 289/902), the *Tārīkh al-umam wa’l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* of al-Kisā’ī (fl. 6th/12th century), the *Tārīkh al-kabīr* of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), the *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), and the *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* of Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176). The works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Kisā’ī are available in English translation.

results in a richly nuanced text but one which can, and should, sometimes be read as a coherent whole. Al-Tha'labī's (d. 427/1035) eleventh century historiographical text is arguably the most comprehensive and most influential text of its genre regarding the pre-Islamic prophets,³ and in this paper I wish to concentrate on the discourse patterns between God and His prophet within the David and the Solomon narratives, and on the resultant indications of the nature of the power relationships between God and David, God and Solomon, within this text. There is some variegation in the pattern of God's discourse with the twenty four pre-Islamic prophets that are mentioned within the Qur'anic narrative, from direct speech to communication via angelic messenger to no reported dialogue at all (Q. 42:51 gives a brief description of this communication process),⁴ but generally speaking the historiographical tradition, which expands and reworks the Qur'anic passages into its chronologically arranged salvation history, alludes to an extremely interactive relationship between God and prophet.

The David narrative is no exception to this pattern. The prophet's story is littered with examples of his dialogue with God, which for the most part exhibit how David turns to God with his worries and his concerns, and the fact that God responds to His prophet with great openness. If we look at every occasion where the two have dialogue, we find David asking God why his powers wane after he is tempted, and God conversing with him on this issue;⁵ God telling David, in a

³ For more information on al-Tha'labī's collection of tales of the prophets see B.M. Hauglid, *Al-Tha'labī's Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': Analysis of the Text, Jewish and Christian Elements, Islamization, and Prefiguration of the Prophethood of Muḥammad*, Unpublished dissertation, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1998, Marianna Klar, 'Stories of the Prophets', in A. Rippin (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 338–349 and idem, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2009, T. Nagel, *Die Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': Ein Beitrag zur Arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Unpublished dissertation, Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1967, pp. 80–102; R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, Curzon Studies in the Qur'an, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002, pp. 146–151. For an in-depth discussion of al-Tha'labī's life and works see W.A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)*, Texts and Studies on the Qur'an, vol. 1, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2004, pp. 25–65.

⁴ *It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will: He is exalted and wise.*

⁵ See Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī, al-ma'rūf bi'l-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā', al-musammā 'Arā'is al-majālis*, 4th edn, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1985, p. 276 citing an anonymous account (cf. W.M. Brinner (trans. and

dream, to have a guilty man executed in order to increase his sovereignty among his people;⁶ David asking God about the merits of his forefathers, and God conversing with him on this issue;⁷ David asking God to make him responsible for his own soul, and God conversing with him on this issue;⁸ David asking God to forgive him his weakness over Bathsheba;⁹ David addressing God at length in his repentance, God responding that David should act to address his perceived difficulties, David declaring his sin, and God declaring His forgiveness;¹⁰ God again declaring His forgiveness, but David wishing for Uriah's forgiveness, so God telling him to go to Uriah's tomb where He will cause him to hear David's plea;¹¹ God telling David to inform Uriah that he has married Bathsheba;¹² God again telling David He has forgiven him his slip, but David again querying how God can forgive him when Uriah has not, that is until God explains to David how He will recompense Uriah on Judgement Day, and David accepting the reality of God's forgiveness;¹³ David speaking to God of his transgression, God's mercy, and the treatment for his condition;¹⁴ David asking God to forgive other sinners that He might perhaps forgive David alongside them;¹⁵ David asking whether God has forgiven him, to which God replies 'Yes', so

annot.), *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, or "Lives of the Prophets" as recounted by Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī, Studies in Arabic Literature: Supplements to the Journal of Arabic Literature, vol. 24, Leiden–Boston–Köln: Brill, 2002, p. 463).

⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 278 citing Ibn 'Abbās (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 466–467).

⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 279 citing al-Suddī, al-Kalbī and Muqātil (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 468–469).

⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 280 citing Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Warrāq (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 470).

⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 282 citing a Ḥadīth (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 473).

¹⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 283–284 citing Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 474–475).

¹¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 284 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 475–476).

¹² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 284 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 476).

¹³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 284 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 476).

¹⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 285 citing al-Ḥasan b. 'Abd Allāh al-Qurashī (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 477).

¹⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 286 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 479).

David asks for a reminder of his sin, and God responds by tattooing it onto his right hand.¹⁶

Contrast this impression with the situation that transpires in al-Tha'labī's Solomon narrative. There, direct conversation with God is scant: Solomon asks God to forgive him for the tears of David over his transgression;¹⁷ God speaks of His gifts to Solomon;¹⁸ Solomon speaks at the sacrifice on the Rock;¹⁹ Solomon addresses God after the discovery of the idol in his palace;²⁰ Solomon asks God to conceal his death from the jinn.²¹ What is immediately striking about this list is that although it includes a few instances where Solomon addresses God, or vice versa, there is no episode of true dialogue between the pair.

This is not however to imply that God does not respond to Solomon's requests: when the prophet prays to God that the Queen of Sheba's throne be brought to him, God immediately responds;²² when the tree worm and the white worm ask that their source of sustenance be trees and fruits respectively, the prophet says that they shall have it, we can only assume in full confidence that God will endorse this promise.²³ The prophet moreover communicates with God by means of the use of sacrifice. Thus sacrifice is used to ascertain whether or not God has sanctioned his plea that the mosque he builds at the Temple should have special cleansing powers: a bolt of flame does descend from heaven and consume the sacrifice, thereby presumably indicating God's approval.²⁴ In another anecdote included within the Solomon narrative,

¹⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 286 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 479).

¹⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 285 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 478, for a quite different rendition of this passage).

¹⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 294 citing Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qaraẓī (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 493).

¹⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 310 citing an anonymous account (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 519).

²⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 323 citing a composite account on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ishāq (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 539).

²¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 327 citing a composite account including Ibn 'Abbās (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 545. See my review of this work in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6:2 (2004), pp. 74–78 for a discussion of Brinner's (mis-)translation of this passage).

²² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 319 citing Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 533).

²³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 317 citing an anonymous account (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 530).

²⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 310 citing an anonymous account (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 519).

the prophet uses sacrifice to express his regret at the perceived sin of missing a prayer time: distracted by his horses from performing the mid-afternoon prayer before the sun sets, he slaughters his horses in an offering to God, who 'rewards' him for this sacrifice thereby again, presumably, indicating his approval.²⁵ This technique of communicating with God is familiar from, for instance, the story of Cain and Abel as given in Q. 5:27,²⁶ although it is far from the direct speech with God enjoyed by David and many other prophets.

Moreover God does not only communicate with His prophets directly: they also interact via angelic messengers. Thus David wonders how God is able to hear him over the sound of nature, and Gabriel descends in order to illustrate to him how God hears all of His creatures;²⁷ God sends an angel to alert David that he feeds his family out of funds from the public treasury;²⁸ Gabriel brings a message from God warning David not to marvel at his own worship;²⁹ God sends two angels to show David that he has wronged Uriah;³⁰ Gabriel tells David that God has forgiven him for this, David asks whether God has absolved him of the resultant bloodwit, Gabriel offers to ask God about this aspect of the issue, David agrees, and Gabriel returns with God's answer;³¹ Gabriel raises David's head after God forgives him his sin;³² the angel of death comes to take David's soul and David converses with him about his

²⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 302 citing al-Ḥasan (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 506). See A.H. Johns, 'Solomon and the Horses: The Theology and Exegesis of a Koranic Story, Sura 38 (*Sad*): 30–33', *MIDEO* 23 (1997), pp. 259–282, for a discussion of this episode.

²⁶ [Prophet], tell them the truth about the story of Adam's two sons: each of them offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one and not the other. One said, 'I will kill you,' but the other said, 'God only accepts the sacrifice of those who are mindful of Him.'

²⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 276 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 464).

²⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 278 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 467).

²⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 280 citing Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Warrāq (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 470).

³⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 280 citing Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Warrāq (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 471).

³¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 282 citing a Ḥadīth (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 473).

³² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 284 citing Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 475).

purpose and the alleged lack of warning of his coming, issues duly answered by the angel.³³

In the case of Solomon, meanwhile, God orders the angels to turn the sun back for Solomon;³⁴ an angel delivers a blow to any demon that defies Solomon's command;³⁵ Gabriel tells Solomon what is inside the Queen of Sheba's sealed casket;³⁶ Gabriel or another angel promises to bring the Queen of Sheba's throne to Solomon;³⁷ in another account God sends the angels to bring the throne to Solomon;³⁸ Gabriel comes to Solomon with a message from God during his meeting with the Queen of Sheba and they converse;³⁹ Gabriel gives Solomon the seal ring that contains his sovereignty;⁴⁰ the Angel of Death comes to warn Solomon of his incipient death, or, in another account, the Angel of Death enters the palace, greets Solomon, and the pair converse about Solomon's desire to enjoy a care-free day, after which Solomon requests that his soul be taken.⁴¹ Again, however, there is a disparity in the nature of the dialogue between David and God's angels, and Solomon and these messengers: although both prophets enjoy a conversation with the Angel of Death immediately prior to their souls being taken, the only other instance in which Solomon is quoted as having a two-way conversation with an angel is when Gabriel descends with a message for the prophet during his encounter with the Queen of Sheba; contrast this with the much more interactive nature of David's dealings with the angels.

³³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 292 citing Abū 'Amr al-Fārābī (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 489–490).

³⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 303 citing 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 507).

³⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 304 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 509).

³⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 317 citing an anonymous source (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 530).

³⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 319 citing anonymous sources (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 532).

³⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 319 citing Ibn 'Abbās (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 532).

³⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 321 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 535).

⁴⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 323 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 539).

⁴¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 327 citing 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 545), and al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 327 citing unnamed sources (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 546).

It can be argued that God's presence and esteem are likewise expressed through His bestowal of gifts upon His prophets. Accordingly, we are told that David is given the psalms, a beautiful voice, good intonation, and exquisite melodies,⁴² the subservience of mountains and birds,⁴³ wisdom and judicial insight,⁴⁴ a magical chain that distinguishes true from false,⁴⁵ strength of worship, intensity of effort (for instance in fasting),⁴⁶ strength of sovereignty,⁴⁷ bravery,⁴⁸ the softening of iron,⁴⁹ and a book of questions to ascertain whether Solomon should succeed his father.⁵⁰ Solomon is meanwhile granted dominion and wisdom,⁵¹ unprecedented special characteristics,⁵² the subjugation of the wind,⁵³ the ability to understand the speech of the birds and the ants,⁵⁴ perfect

⁴² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 275 citing no named source alongside Q. 4:163, *To David We gave the book [of Psalms]* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 462).

⁴³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 276 citing no named source alongside Q. 34:10, *We graced David with Our favour. We said, 'You mountains, echo God's praises together with him, and you birds, too.' We softened iron for him*, and Q. 21:79, *We made the mountains and the birds celebrate Our praises with David* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 463).

⁴⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 276 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 464–465).

⁴⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 277 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 465).

⁴⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 277 citing no named source alongside Q. 38:17, *Remember Our servant David, a man of strength who always turned to Us* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 466).

⁴⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 278 citing no named source alongside Q. 38:20, *We strengthened his kingdom* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 466).

⁴⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 278 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 467).

⁴⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 278–279 citing no named source alongside Q. 34:10–11 *We softened iron for him, saying 'Make coats of chain mail and measure the links well'* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 467–468), and alluded to (though not discussed) on p. 276 through al-Tha'labī's citation of Q. 34:10 (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 464).

⁵⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 290 citing Abū Hurayra (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 486).

⁵¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 292 citing Muqātil (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 490).

⁵² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 293 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 491).

⁵³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 293 citing no named source alongside Q. 38:36, *So We gave him power over the wind, which at his request ran gently wherever he willed* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 491).

⁵⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 294 citing no named source alongside Q. 27:16, *People, we have been taught the speech of birds* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 493).

Arab horses brought out from the sea,⁵⁵ a spring of molten brass,⁵⁶ the subjection of the jinn, mankind, birds, beasts and demons,⁵⁷ and the task of completing the Temple, denied to David.⁵⁸ Here therefore it can be argued that it is Solomon who seems to be singled out by God for special attention, for although David's gifts are indeed delightful, they do not match the power and grandeur of all that God bestows upon Solomon; it seems clear therefore that while Solomon does not appear to enjoy the close relationship with God his father was privileged to experience, this is by no means a sign of God's displeasure, merely a different way of interacting with each of the pair.

The question remains, however, of whether these contrasting patterns of divine communication affect each prophet's apparent understanding of, and interaction with, God and whether we can, in turn, draw conclusions from this regarding God's perceived authority in the narrative. Let us turn to evidence of each prophet's construction of God within the two texts. In addition to the God we perceive through direct dialogue, David explicitly mentions God in the following instances: within the Saul story, he tells his father how he was praising God as he walked through the mountains, and the mountains started praising God alongside him;⁵⁹ he rejects Saul's offer of weapons with which to fight Goliath, saying that victory is rather in God's hands;⁶⁰ he tells Goliath that God will 'scatter his flesh between the beasts and the birds in the sky', and places the rocks that will kill Goliath in his slingshot saying 'In the name of God';⁶¹ when Saul tries to kill David, he says, 'God forbid that I should fear anything other than God, or take refuge

⁵⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 302 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 506).

⁵⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 304 citing no named source alongside Q. 34:12, *We made a fountain of molten brass flow for him* (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 508).

⁵⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 304 citing no named source (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 508–509).

⁵⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 308 citing an anonymous source (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 516). For a discussion of David's 'apparent subordination' to Solomon see Hamid Algar, 'Q. 21:78–9: A Qur'anic Basis for *Ijtihad*?', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4.2 (2002), pp. 1–22.

⁵⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 270 citing a composite account (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 453).

⁶⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 271 citing a composite account (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 455).

⁶¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 271 citing a composite account (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 456).

in anything other than Him. He is the only one capable of repelling evil,' and cites the Torah in support of retaliation;⁶² when David flees Saul and goes to the mountains, he dedicates himself to the service of God there.⁶³ Within the actual David story, we are told that the prophet was 'repentant, glorifying God and obedient', and his rigorous fasting habits are described;⁶⁴ later we are told that he spent one day in three 'serving his Lord and reciting the Scriptures';⁶⁵ when he sends Uriah to the front, we are told that this is a position it was not lawful to abandon until 'God granted victory or made him a martyr';⁶⁶ in his conversation with Gabriel, David is sure of God's forgiveness and justice, but sees this as applying also to God's granting of recompense to Uriah for David's actions toward him;⁶⁷ finally, David tells Solomon that God has sent a book of questions to determine his successor and told him to ask him them, then announces to the people that God has commanded that Solomon be made his successor;⁶⁸ he subsequently tells Solomon to take strength in God, obey Him, and spread His mercy.⁶⁹

Solomon, meanwhile, explicitly mentions God when David presents him with the book of questions, saying '*I cannot succeed without God's help*';⁷⁰ he talks of God to a ploughman, telling him that a divinely-accepted statement of his (the ploughman's) praise is worth more than all that has been given to the family of David;⁷¹ he explains to his courtiers that the call of the shrike invites sinners to beg pardon

⁶² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 272 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', pp. 457–458).

⁶³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 273 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 459).

⁶⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 277 on no named authority, in reference to Q. 38:17, *Remember Our servant David, a man of strength who always turned to Us* (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 466).

⁶⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 279 citing a composite account on the authority of al-Suddī, al-Kalbī and Muqātil (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 468).

⁶⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 280 citing al-Suddī (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 469).

⁶⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 282 citing a Ḥadīth (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 473).

⁶⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 290 citing Abū Hurayra (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', pp. 486–487).

⁶⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 291 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 488).

⁷⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 290 citing Abū Hurayra and Q. 11:88 (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 486).

⁷¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 293 citing the father of Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, '*Arā'is al-majālis*', p. 492).

of God, while various other birds (and the frog) speak out in praise of Him,⁷² the swift asks God to help those who go astray, the lark calls on Him to curse those who hate the family of Muḥammad,⁷³ and the ant warns all to fear God in public and in private, be frugal in poverty and in wealth, and act justly in contentment and in anger;⁷⁴ Solomon argues at length with the phoenix about the nature of fate and God's decree, stating that 'God does not give His servants any will of their own';⁷⁵ he tells the Queen of Sheba's messengers that he has no need of the world, for God has already placed it in his hands, and given him prophethood and wisdom besides;⁷⁶ when one of the Israelites points out to him that, as God's prophet, God will answer his request for the Queen of Sheba's throne, the prophet realises that this is indeed the case and prays for the throne;⁷⁷ he orders the Queen of Sheba to accept a husband, stating that it is not appropriate for her to forbid what God has permitted.⁷⁸ Solomon also tells his wife not to grieve for the loss of her father or her homeland, as God has given her better in return: Solomon's kingdom, and Islam.⁷⁹ Finally, he says to his friends that God has given him great sovereignty, but that he has never spent an untroubled day.⁸⁰ If we consider these statements, and contrast them to the utterances within the David narrative, the pervading impression is of a much stronger sense of God, both as an individual and as a presence, within the Solomon narrative.

God's presence in the Solomon story can also be read in the prophet's reaction to the perceived threat of God's anger: the prophet flicks away an ant, who rebukes him, saying 'Don't you know that I am the slavegirl

⁷² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 294 citing, variously, Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Makhḥūl (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 493–494).

⁷³ For both these statements see al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 295 citing al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 494).

⁷⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 295 citing an unnamed source (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 495).

⁷⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 301 citing Muḥammad b. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 505).

⁷⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 318 citing various unnamed sources and Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 530).

⁷⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 319 citing Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 533).

⁷⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 321 citing Wahb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 536).

⁷⁹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 322 citing a composite account on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ishāq (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, p. 538).

⁸⁰ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 327 citing unnamed sources (cf. Brinner, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 545–546).

of Him whose servant you are?', and Solomon swoons, then asks the ant that he be absolved of his action;⁸¹ Solomon swears that he will kill or severely punish the hoopoe for its absence from his court, but the hoopoe reminds him that he stands before God and Solomon 'trembles and forgives him';⁸² the reason for Solomon's extreme anger at the hoopoe is the fear of there being a delay to his prayer time because the bird is not there to source water for him to wash before prayer;⁸³ in some accounts Solomon slaughters his horses in sacrifice to God after they cause him to miss the mid-afternoon prayer.⁸⁴ Another episode of note could arguably be the occasion where the Queen of Sheba asks Solomon to explain to her how God exists, and the prophet falls down from his throne in prayer. Gabriel wipes the memory of all those present, with the possible exception of Solomon himself, clean of the incident.⁸⁵

There is nothing comparable to any of these episodes in the David story: he seems quite confident, for instance, in the appropriateness and acceptability of his prayer habits (indeed, he has the reassurance of Gabriel's demonstration to him of how even the quietest prayers are heard, and the comfort provided by hearing the mountains worship alongside him), and although he weeps long and hard over the realisation of the part he played in the Bathsheba situation, God would appear to be at pains to reassure His prophet that He has indeed forgiven him.⁸⁶ Therefore, for all that it says at one point in al-Tha'labī's text that there is nothing wrong with David after his sin but 'his shame and fear of God',⁸⁷ it cannot be argued that it is fear of God's reaction per se that causes him to behave in this way; moreover, we are told in one anecdote

⁸¹ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 296 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 495–496).

⁸² See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 312 citing no named source (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 522).

⁸³ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 312 on no named authority (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 521).

⁸⁴ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 302 citing anonymous sources (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 506). Again, see Johns, 'Solomon and the Horses: The Theology and Exegesis of a Koranic Story, Sura 38 (*Sad*): 30–33', for a discussion of this episode.

⁸⁵ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 321 citing Wabb b. Munabbih (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 535).

⁸⁶ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 282 citing a Ḥadīth, and p. 284 citing Wabb b. Munabbih, p. (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p.). See also M.O. Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss*, Routledge Curzon, 2009, Chapter 6, and A.H. Johns, 'David and Bathsheba: A Case-study in Qur'anic Exegesis', *MIDEO* 19 (1989), pp. 225–266.

⁸⁷ See al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 286 citing a Ḥadīth (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 479).

that when David remembered God's punishment, his limbs would grow limp, but when he subsequently recalled His mercy, they would return to their normal state.⁸⁸ David's reaction to the possibility of having maybe displeased his Lord is very different to Solomon's. The God we see constructed in David's incidental comments is also different to the God we perceive in the Solomon narrative: where Solomon mentions, and questions, the value of the gifts that have been bestowed upon him, in terms of them granting him salvation, and warns that God should be praised, feared, and supplicated, David's references never exceed the impersonal and commonplace. That the mystery of the divine makes the divine appear more forceful is often posited as a truism. This is amply demonstrated in al-Tha'labī's narrative. Although Solomon is, like his father before him, liberally bestowed with gifts, and indeed has the power to bestow livelihoods in his turn on the tree-worm and the white worm, he does not appear to communicate with God, either directly or via angelic messenger. He rarely addresses God in direct speech, and, when he does so, God never replies. We can argue that it is in compensation for these absences that we can perceive a pervading sense in the tale of God's silent presence: in the shape of the grandeur of His gifts to Solomon, and in the voices of the birds and the frogs, speaking of His majesty and advising regarding His might. I would also argue that it is in consequence to these absences that we perceive a sense of uncertainty in Solomon's dealings with God; the verbally-communicated-with David seems more self-assured in this respect. Where do trust, familiarity, our need for dialogue, and our perception of, or construction of, power coincide?

The final question that remains is the extent to which these two patterns of human~divine communication and perceived divine authority outlined above are reflected in the Qur'anic passages per se. If we return to the narratives surrounding the two Qur'anic pericopes in question, we see that although both describe episodes in each prophet's life where he was tried by God, repented, and was given a subsequent reward, in David's case, this information is augmented by a description of the nature of David's repentance (*he fell down on his knees, and repented*), and followed by a reminder to David that his majesty brings with it the responsibility to judge fairly between people, and he should not give

⁸⁸ See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, p. 286 citing Thābit (cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, p. 479).

in to his own desires, verse 26: *David, We have given you mastery over the land. Judge fairly between people. Do not follow your desires, lest they divert you from God's path.* Solomon's Qur'anic pericope includes the words of Solomon's prayer of repentance, *Lord, forgive me! Grant me such power as no one after me will have—You are the Most Generous Provider*, and, in verses 36–39, a list of God's gifts to His prophet, *So We gave him power over the wind, which at his request ran gently wherever he willed, and the jinn—every kind of builder and diver and others chained in fetters. This is Our gift, so give or withhold as you wish without account.* The tone of the historiographical narrative, therefore, can be seen to echo the Qur'anic passages about which such narratives are built: David receives words of counsel from his Lord, yet despite the fact that Solomon directly addresses God, he is rewarded not with counsel but with gifts of sovereignty and power.

The context for each Qur'anic repentance narrative is provided by the immediately preceding Qur'anic verses: for David, the prophet's ruling in the case of two litigants, seen as an allegory for David himself and Uriah, whose wife Bathsheba David subsequently married; in Solomon's by the parade-ground incident, conflictually interpreted as referring to Solomon's declaring his love of his horses to be part of his worshipping God, and stroking them as a result, or, as mentioned above, Solomon's being distracted from prayer by a parade of his horses and slaughtering them as a result. The historiographical tradition expounds on these two passages by providing reasons for why Bathsheba was placed in David's way; for Solomon, however, al-Tha'labī gives several alternative contexts for Solomon's trial and subsequent repentance: inter alia, various sins connected to marriage, including the sanctioned or unsanctioned worship of an idol by the prophet's wife, the horses incident mentioned above, or Solomon attempting to cheat death on his small child's behalf by handing the child over to the clouds for safe-keeping. Solomon's trial per se is then defined as being the *skeleton* on the throne mentioned in the Qur'anic pericope: either the body of Solomon's son cast down onto the throne, or the replacement of Solomon on his throne, by his vizier, or by a demon who assumes the prophet's form.⁸⁹ It would therefore appear that while al-Tha'labī and his sources are comfortable,

⁸⁹ See M.O. Klar, 'And We cast upon the throne a mere body: A Historiographical Reading of Q. 38:34', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6.1 (2004), pp. 103–126, for a discussion of these narratives.

and confident, in ascribing David's trial to the incident with Bathsheba, there is some doubt over the identification of Solomon's trial, both insofar as we are unsure of the cause of it, and insofar as we are unsure of its manifestation. What I would like to propose is that one of the areas in which this lack of certainty manifests itself is in the sense of insecurity we perceive in Solomon's perception of and dealings with God. Here we turn again to the interaction between our need for secure knowledge, and our perception of power. If the narrative itself cannot be confident of how the prophet disobeyed God's laws, or of what the resultant punishment may have been, how can we expect the Solomon who is a construct of this very narrative to act in a confident manner? In my closing statement, therefore, I would say that although the Qur'an may not explicitly dictate the nature of the human~divine power paradigm in these two cases, it definitely informs the terms by which these relationships are constructed.

IN POSSESSION OF THE NIGHT: LILITH AS GODDESS, DEMON, VAMPIRE

Beth E. McDonald

Cultural and anthropological studies of the past have argued that at some point in time in various cultures the male (Sky) god gained power over the female (Earth) goddess as more patriarchal-structured cultures replaced the partnership cultures where men and women ruled and were worshiped equally. The male god of Hebrew, Christian and Islamic tradition is most often characterized as a political entity, one of imperialistic authority, a powerful ruler, a “king, judge, warrior”¹ who not only creates and orders the world out of chaos, but also reorders it whenever chaos threatens. As a numinous figure He is an agent of power, and through humanity’s subjection to Him, He is an agent of plenitude. Under a patriarchal structure control equals plenitude; under the matriarchal system fertility, an aspect characteristic of the feminine, equals plenitude. If one looks at early confrontations between the female, goddess-based cultures and those of the invading, or ever-expanding male, god-based cultures, one might argue that the male dominated society, in confrontation with one where the females were of equal stature, might feel threatened by the numinous representation of the female deity. The solution to this confrontation then for many male-oriented religious power structures would be to lose control or take control. Assimilation, destruction, or conquest? Since the assimilation or destruction of their own system would not be acceptable to the invading culture, the female power structure would have to be the one assimilated or destroyed.

In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* noted religious scholar Mircea Eliade posits that possession of an uninhabited or previously inhabited place is brought about through the consecration, or making sacred, of that place by the culture taking possession. This act of sacred imperialism is characterized by the struggle for power and

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Symmetry and Extremity in Images of YHWH,” *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2001; 2005: 241–257), 241.

authority over the numinous as it is figured in the culture being so consecrated.² In *The Idea of the Holy*, religious historian and scholar Rudolf Otto, having coined the word numinous from *numen*, defines it as an awareness of the divine or sacred and describes it as “the *feeling* which remains where the *concept* fails.”³ As a subjective experience, the sacred can only be comprehended on emotional and psychological levels and, therefore, is inexpressible through language. However, Otto attempts to express the numinous experience through its qualities of mystery, dread, and fascination.⁴ The attribute of mystery requires that the numinous be perceived as a real presence in the world and yet at the same time as “something inherently ‘wholly other’.”⁵ The awe and puzzlement felt by the subject of the encounter with otherness are enhanced through the second quality, dread, as a reaction to the sense of powerlessness the subject feels in reference to the absolute power and energy emanating from the numinous presence. For Otto, the play of power against powerlessness, energy or will against enervation, “implies . . . a category of valuation”⁶ that Otto calls “‘creature-consciousness’,”⁷ an awareness that the numinous presence has the ability to annihilate the subject. However, even while the subject of the numinous encounter is overwhelmed by fear, the final attribute fascination also exerts pressure by awakening the imagination and human curiosity. Through the quality of fascination, the numinous entices the subject toward full understanding, the achievement of which means annihilation of the subject’s will; the numinous may, according to Otto, “burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.”⁸ In other words, the numinous, with its elements of mystery,

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959; 1987).

³ Rudolf Otto, Foreword by the Author to First Edition, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), n.p.

⁴ Readers of this essay may find the introductory chapter and index to my book, *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004), of interest for a more in depth explanation of the concept of the numinous.

⁵ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

dread, and fascination, is a dangerous presence; and interaction with it leads to loss of control, to assimilation or destruction.

For Otto, the numinous also may be experienced negatively, as a figure, such as a ghost, demon or vampire, in which the daemonic aspects of the experience are fore-grounded. In the negatively numinous, the dread changes from awe to "horror and shuddering"⁹ as the subject's perception of possible harm increases. To articulate the negatively numinous, Otto posited that the relationship between humankind and the divine began with a primal experience of good and evil potential as balanced in an "Indifferent" being.¹⁰ The numinous, therefore, has the potential for both goodness and wrathfulness, but the negatively numinous is more aligned with the potential for evil, based on the subject's perception not only of the ability, but also of the seeming intent, of the numinous to do harm.

Fear of subjugation or annihilation of the self in identification with the *numen* as female might have fueled the need of cultures which held males to be superior to recast the relationship of human and divine inherent in the vanquished culture. In the struggle for sacred power and authority, a figure like Lilith as representative of feminine divinity would have to be assimilated or transformed from the more positive numinous object as goddess into the more negatively numinous realm of demon and vampire in order for her divine power to be compromised or negated completely. Although the numinous as a quality of spiritual experience cannot be conceptualized, the transformation of the Lilith figure from goddess to demon to vampire takes place on both verbal and visual levels as her name, her characteristics and her symbols are manipulated toward a more negatively numinous potential in order to gain power over her divinity.

As a goddess, or a figure connected with the goddess, Lilith represents the possibility of both good and evil balanced in an Indifferent divine figure which must be propitiated. Her name is linked to the Terra Mater, or Great Mother, figures of several cultures, including the Canaanite Balaat, the Sumero-Babylonian Belit-ili or Belili, the Assyrian/Babylonian Lilitu, Al Lat and Al Uzza, and the Babylonian Ishtar or Inanna.¹¹ In the Babylonian cult of Inanna/Ishtar, Lilith is

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹¹ Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 541; Merlin Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*:

characterized as a handmaiden of Inanna¹² and, as such, may have been a temple harlot responsible for promoting the land's fertility through sacred sexual intercourse.¹³

As a negatively numinous figure Lilith is identified in Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic literatures with demons, vampires, and djinns. In Hebrew tradition, particularly, Lilith is considered to be the first wife of Adam, who becomes a demon of the night by refusing to lie beneath him in the sexual position of submission to male superiority. In many artistic renditions, including Michelangelo's artistic vision in the Sistine Chapel and the carving of Adam, Eve, and Lilith which is part of the façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, she is figured as half woman and half snake with the wings of a bird. These images may indicate her lineage through such figures as Lamashtu and the Greek *lamia* or serpent goddess and may also implicate her as the serpent that tempted Eve; however, the serpent also is a symbol of energy, force and regenerative powers, powers that an invading male culture may have found unacceptable when figured in a female form. Some scholars see her refusal to submit to Adam as the Great Mother's refusal of "patriarchal marriage"¹⁴ or as an early attempt to assimilate the Sumero-Babylonian goddess figure into Jewish mythology.¹⁵ If so, characterizing Lilith as a demon specter of femininity transforms her from a figure of veneration to one of loathing. This Lilith was not to be appeased or propitiated; nor was an understanding of her divine mystery to be sought. Instead, Jewish tradition called for amulets of protection against her evil. In Mesopotamian/Arabic culture, the end of goddess worship would come through the rise of Islam in the seventh century with the prophet Mohammed and the establishment of the Qur'an as a holy text. As Islamic religion gained momentum, goddesses like Al Lat and Al Uzza were replaced with the worship of Allah.¹⁶

This change in Lilith's status is tied to a change in her numinous potential as it is verbally and visually imagined. The ambiguity of

A Treasury of Goddess and Heroine Lore from Around the World (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 127; Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace, 1976), 195.

¹² Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, 127; Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, 158.

¹³ Stone, *When God was a Woman*, 158.

¹⁴ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Bollingen Series XLVII. Princeton: Princeton/Bollingen, 1974), 277.

¹⁵ Walker, *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, 541.

¹⁶ Stone, *When God was a Woman*, 195.

word meanings connected with the Lilith figure seems to allow the most movement from positive to negative numinous potential. Sacred imperialism has much to do with how the divine is articulated in the world. To take away power, you take away identity or name or cloud the connotations of the name, so future generations have no clear understanding of its meaning. In his translation of *Gilgamesh* Tablet XII, researcher Samuel Noah Kramer interpreted the phrase *ki-sikil-lil-la-ke* as a reference to Lilith being a demon who has taken up residence in a tree sacred to the goddess Inanna.¹⁷ However, since, in the Sumerian language, *Ki* denotes place or location and *Sikil* is translated as clean, fresh, or virginal, taken together the syllables *Ki-sikil* might translate as “untouched ground”¹⁸ or virginal, pure place, which seems to signify some type of temple or spiritual location. *Lil* is most often translated as wind or spirit, and coupled with the connotation of *Ki-sikil* could be interpreted as the divine wind or spirit, which again would have its abode in a temple or other spiritual place. The syllable combination *Lil-la-ke* also can be translated as the spirit of water, seminal fluid, or flood, all of which seem to relate to the figure of the Mother Goddess in her aspect of fertility and abundance.¹⁹

Moreover, the meaning of parts of the phrase *Lil-a-ke* may be translated differently. *Lil* may also mean infection, which coupled with the wind connotation might indicate the *simoom* (from the Arabic *samm*; to poison), often characterized as a poison wind that sweeps across the Asian and African deserts in the spring and summer carrying infection and pestilence.²⁰ In Hebrew tradition, furthermore, Lilith is said to be the wife/consort of Samael (variously spelled Samiel) a prominent demon, whose name also may come from *samm* (poison) and *yel* (wind), the appellation for the simoom.²¹

In addition, in the syllable *La* one can see again the possibility that translation could well have allowed the consecrating culture to redefine the goddess. *La* is translated from the Sumerian as abundance, desire,

¹⁷ Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 5–9.

¹⁸ John A. Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon: A Dictionary Guide to the Ancient Sumerian Language* (Oxford, UK: Logogram Pub./Oxbow Books, 2006).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

²¹ Ibid.

or bliss, but can also mean “to force or penetrate,”²² which might be how Lilith came to be characterized as a demon and vampire. A simple change in interpretation and the abundance of the goddess becomes the force of the demon and the penetration of the vampire’s fangs. Finally, *Lilitu*, one of the names by which Lilith often is known, is translated in one context as a moon spirit and as month, and also might be derived from Assyrian *lilitu* meaning “demon of the night air,”²³ connecting her directly to the moon aspect of the Mother Goddess and to the monthly cycles of female fertility. Although this also was the name of a demon in ancient Assyrian myths, if the women of Ishtar (the temple harlots) are referred to as Ishtaritu,²⁴ might not Lilitu mean the women of Lil or women of the spirit/goddess of the air/wind. As such, Lilith is also linked to Ninlil “Lady of Air,” a Sumerian mother goddess.²⁵

The demon Lilith is accused of encouraging illegitimate births and causing barrenness and miscarriages.²⁶ As a vampire figure she is said to suck the blood of children and then strangle them.²⁷ In these images, the maternal aspects of the goddess now are concentrated in the Vengeful or Terrible Mother image;²⁸ and the shift to the negative numinous is from fear and awe to shuddering horror as the sense of helplessness encompasses real time, male fears of control over birth, death, and sexual encounters. Additionally, in the Talmud, Lilith is no longer discussed in the singular and, therefore, is no longer considered “the One” but one of many. In her plurality she is characterized as “female night demons.”²⁹ If the sacred represents order in the world, Lilith as demon represents chaos and danger to the beliefs of the inhabiting culture. Furthermore, Lilith is only mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in Isaiah 34:14.³⁰ There she is consigned a resting place in a desert described as the habitation of owls, ravens, jackals, hyenas, satyrs, snakes, vultures, and wild cats. Lilith’s name is

²² Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon*.

²³ Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, 127.

²⁴ Stone, *When God was a Woman*, 159.

²⁵ Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*, 127.

²⁶ J. Gordon Melton, *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1999), 422.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.

²⁸ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd eds., trans. Jack Sage (New York: Dorset Press, 1971), 188.

²⁹ Barbara Black Koltuv, Preface, *The Book of Lilith* (Berwick, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 1986), n.p.

³⁰ *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Standard ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

translated in various versions of the Bible as night-monster, night hag, night jar, and screech owl. Obviously, from the company of wild things Lilith is numbered among, she is considered a wild thing herself; and the company she is thrust among has possession of the night when the mystery and dread of the numinous are the greatest.

Subject to the possible assimilation or destruction of their own divine figures, the invading culture would fear the feminine sacred as a representative of evil and would seek to characterize her as such. Described as a wild haired, winged spirit of the wind by the Assyrians and as a screech owl in Hebrew, Lilith becomes a figure of horror who entices humanity into desolate and deserted places in order to harm them. As a succubus, her owl feet now indicate nocturnal life and monstrosity. Her virginal aspects are now transformed to sexual promiscuity, and male fears of illegitimate heritage come to the forefront. In Hebrew, Christian and Islamic tradition demons such as Lilith have become represent sexual fears, fears of the loss of male power, of possession, conquest, and loss of control. The conquest of the male by an evil female seductress, or succubus, turns on forbidden sexuality, sexual pleasure; and the inexhaustible fecundity of Lilith as goddess now produces a plenitude of demons and illegitimate children who ultimately will challenge the father for inheritance and power. Fascination with the *numen* becomes the enticement and temptation connected with illicit sexual contact, and satisfaction is now relegated to the unsanctioned sexuality of night emissions and wasted seed. In the translation of the Vulgate Bible Lilith's transformation is taken a step further; there she becomes the vampire figure, the Greek *lamia*.

As goddess becomes demon a shift takes place in the mystery attribute of the numinous. No longer is the divine feminine an Indifferent balance of good and evil; now she is characterized as wholly evil. In his treatise on the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke tells us that an unknown quantity is always more feared than a known one, simply because we cannot encompass with our minds what we cannot see or understand as a whole entity; not being able to understand what is, we cannot control our fear of what might be.³¹ It is the mystery of the

³¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, eds. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 58.

unknown that has the power to frighten and control, so take away the mystery and the power shifts from object to subject of the encounter. In the power shift that redefines Lilith, the element of fascination becomes less spiritual and the loss of self is only temporary as the male succumbs to sexual hunger. Where once desire was figured as sacred sexual contact ensuring fertility for the land and people, with the demon Lilith desire is illicit and productive of an undesired abundance of illegitimate children, a concern characteristic of masculine human nature in most cultures of the world.³²

In this shift of power from goddess to demon and vampire, the symbols connected with the goddess figure also have been transformed through time. Although there is some disagreement about the identification, the image most often identified as Lilith, in the Burney Plaque, shows a winged goddess figure in relief. She wears a crown or headdress composed of four sets of horns signifying "strength and power" as well as the "glory" of divinity. Horns also are indicative of both the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine—the feminine horn symbol being a receptacle like the horn of plenty, a symbol of plenitude and fertility; the masculine image, one of penetration.³³ The figure in the plaque holds in each upraised hand the symbols of ring and rod which signify not only power, but also totality, eternity and the goddess's dual role as creator and destroyer of life.³⁴ She stands on the back of two lions, grasping them with her taloned feet and is flanked by two owls. The lions are symbolic of the masculine solar principle, particularly young lions which are representative of the sun rising, while the goddess's feminine principle is represented by the moon or night; so in the carving she rests upon and is connected to the masculine principle, just as the moon relies upon the sun for its light. Lions also are considered the guardian of the Great Mother, serve as her mounts, and are symbolic of birth and death.³⁵ Women's societies are most often connected with birth and fertility, with child-bearing and the mysteries surrounding it; and death is always linked with birth as the moon is most often the symbol of the goddess and related directly to the cycles of womanhood controlling fertility. The symbolic death and rebirth of the moon as seen

³² David P. Barash and Nanelle R. Barash, *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2005), 20.

³³ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189–90.

in its cycles are connected to fertility of the land and people, abundance, power, and the feminine principle. The fecundity of the goddess means the fertility of the land and people. The owls represent the death aspect of the goddess, being night creatures connected with the moon and the dead or setting sun as opposed to the rising sun of the lions.³⁶ In Hebrew symbolism, associated with Lilith, the owl represents “forbidden wisdom.”³⁷ Together these images, encompassing as they do both the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine, underscore the goddess as representative of eternity or totality.

However, as the goddess was transformed into demon and vampire, Lilith’s characteristics and symbols changed, also. The horns symbolic of her divine power become the devil’s or demon’s horns and eventually the fangs of the vampire. The fecundity of the goddess representing abundance for her people is now signified by the great number of demon children born to her each day. As a vampire, Lilith represents more a lack of abundance and lack even of sexual satisfaction; as a vampire she represents eternal hunger and like her counterpart the demon Lilith, the vampire Lilith has a taste for blood. The womb of the goddess, signifying her powers of fertility and plenitude, becomes for the demon Lilith an inexhaustible source of demons; and with the vampire, the womb takes on the image of mouth or throat as an enclosed dark chamber of horrors, with teeth now, a gaping *vagina dentata* threatening male sexual power. Here the issues of unsanctioned sexuality and of demonic possession that caused dread with Lilith as a demon are overshadowed by conquest issues that exist on a more spiritual level. The fascination felt by the subject of the encounter is now seen in the hypnotic effects of the vampire and is harder to resist than the demon’s nightmare visits. Coupled with irresistible fascination is fear for the mortal soul which brings with it a horrifying realization that one might be forever caught on the edge of spiritual transcendence.

The political aspect of the conquest of Goddess/Woman by God/Man involves a transfer and transformation of the power structure. The making or unmaking of a powerful image through the act of speech involves the transformation of meaning of the symbols and characteristics of the original image in a way that will negate the power of the original.

³⁶ Ibid., 247.

³⁷ Rowena Shepherd and Rupert Shepherd, *1000 Symbols: What Shapes Mean in Art and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 2002), 197.

While as a negatively numinous figure Lilith keeps some of her divine power, she is still relegated to the negative and horrifying side of the spiritual. The act of sacred imperialism is a struggle for power; in that struggle Lilith was transformed from goddess to demon to vampire. When Lilith was figured as a demon or vampire, her divinity was overshadowed by a sense of horror, by sexual fascination and frenzied loss of control. In the process of her transformation, then, she lost some of her numinous mystery, awe and fascination as they are represented in her potential for both good and evil and in her image as a source of plenitude, satisfaction, and ecstatic spiritual power. Having been transformed into the negatively numinous object of fear and loathing, a warning to all women who overstep their bounds and to all men who let them, she came to represent not only a loss of control, but also a loss of spirituality.

IMAGES OF ABRAHAM AND G-D IN A JEWISH READING OF GENESIS

Marvin A. Sweeney

The publication of Bruce Feiler's, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*,¹ opens once again the long-standing question of Abraham's role as the founder of western monotheism in general and his foundational roles in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although published for the general reader, Feiler's book reflects a major shift in scholarly discussion of the figure of Abraham. Whereas the past generation of biblical scholarship attempted to define the historicity of Abraham and the other patriarchal figures of the Bible as well as the compositional history of the Abraham/Sarah narratives,² contemporary scholarship has turned to literary and theological assessments of the Genesis narratives³ and the roles that Abraham and the other ancestral characters play in subsequent Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition.⁴ Such an effort reflects an interest in reappropriating the presentation of Abraham in relation to the concerns of biblical theology and in fostering dialog between the major western monotheistic traditions.

Readers will recognize of course that Abraham commands such great interest in each of the three monotheistic traditions because of his relationship with G-d. Although study of the presentation and character of

¹ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

² See A.R. Millard, "Abraham," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, eds. D.N. Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 35–41; Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

³ E.g., David Cotter, *Genesis* (Berit Olam: Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003); Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation: Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004). For a cogent attempt to combine historical and literary concerns, see David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

⁴ E.g., Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993); Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1990).

Abraham (and his wife Sarah) reveals important facets of the conceptualization of the purported founder of western monotheism, ultimately, study of the character of Abraham plays a far more compelling role in examining the character of G-d.⁵ When read from the standpoint of Jewish tradition and its concerns with covenant, the granting of land to the people of Israel, and the question of the potential loss of land and exile, the presentation of Abraham's relationship with G-d in the book of Genesis provides a basis for exploring the question of divine righteousness and fidelity to the covenant. Ultimately, Genesis affirms G-d's commitment to Abraham. But by raising questions concerning G-d's fidelity to the covenant with Abraham, the Abraham/Sarah narratives in Genesis 11:27–25:11 provide the reader with an opportunity to reflect the questions of divine evil, including the potential for exile and loss of land, in Jewish tradition.⁶ Such questions continue today as Judaism examines G-d's character and power in relation to the modern questions of the Shoah and the reestablishment of the nation Israel.⁷

Jewish tradition considers Abraham to be the founder of monotheism and the founder of the Jewish people. At the same time, Judaism recognizes that the book of Genesis does not deny Abraham's role as the founder of other nations. Certainly, the identification in Genesis of Abraham as the father of Ishmael, and Ishmael's role in founding a nation of his own demonstrates that Abraham functions as the father of other nations as well. But such a portrayal does not provide grounds to deny that Abraham was the first Jew. Indeed, the challenges to that status have only emerged with the later development of Christianity and Islam, both of which look to Abraham as a key figure in the foundation of their own traditions, as a faithful believer in the one G-d

⁵ See W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of G-d in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). For discussion of characterization in biblical narrative, see esp. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁶ James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of G-d as an Oppressive Presence* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing G-d: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

⁷ Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997); Zachery Braiterman, *(G-d) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); cf. Clark Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

who then constitutes the exemplar for Christian faith in the letters of Paul (Romans 4; Galatians 3:3–7; Hebrews 11:8–10; James 2:21–23) or the exemplar of a human being who submitted to Allah in the Quran (Sura 22:77, “The Pilgrimage”). And yet neither Christianity nor Islam needs to claim Abraham exclusively as their own to make their points. Abraham appears first and foremost in the Jewish Bible as the founder of monotheism and as the founder of at least two nations, and thus as the model for the world’s major monotheistic religious traditions as they might be practiced by nations other than Israel. The question then becomes the extent to which Christianity and Islam recognize and affirm their Jewish roots and the continuing integrity of Judaism.

Indeed, Judaism has the capacity to recognize the legitimacy of other religious traditions. Rabbinic tradition looks to Noah as the progenitor of all human beings, and argues that all human beings have the obligation to observe the seven Noachide moral laws (bSanhedrin 56–60). According to the Noachide laws, Jews are obligated to observe the entire Torah, but Gentiles are obligated to avoid idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, eating from a living animal, and they are also obligated to establish legal systems.⁸ Rabbinic tradition considers Islam to be an example of a religious tradition in conformity with the Noachide laws, and although there was early debate about the status of Christianity—because of its doctrine of the Trinity—Christianity also came to be accepted as an example of a Noachide religious tradition.

Many polemicists point to the fact that Abraham lived before the revelation of divine Torah at Mt. Sinai in an effort to deny his Jewish status, but identity as a Jew is not rooted in observance of Torah. Although belief and perhaps practice stands at the basis of Christian or Muslim identity, a Jew is defined by birth to a Jewish mother or by conversion to Judaism.⁹ A failure to believe in G-d or to observe Torah does not negate one’s identity as a Jew; such failures simply indicate that one has committed transgression in Jewish practice. With only three exceptions, apostasy, adultery, and murder, a Jew may make atonement for transgressions by restoring what has been inflicted upon

⁸ “Noachide Laws,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. C. Roth et al. (Jerusalem: Keter, n.d.), vol. 12, cols. 1189–1191.

⁹ “Jew, Who is a?, Controversy,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, eds. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and G. Wigoder (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 369–370; see also Arthur Hertzberg, “Jewish Identity,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 370–372.

another and by asking forgiveness from those who are wronged and from G-d (bSanhedrin 74a). Rabbinic tradition considers Abraham as a man who observed Torah even before it was revealed through Moses at Mt. Sinai (bYoma 28b; bNedarim 32a), but the fact of the matter is that Abraham's identity as a Jew does not require his observance of the Torah; it requires only his covenant with G-d. For that matter, the identity of Jews who lived prior to the revelation of Torah or afterwards is not dependent upon their observance of Torah; their identities as Jews depend only upon their birth to a Jewish mother or their conversion to Judaism.

Such considerations point us to the question of Abraham's role in Jewish tradition and in the Bible in particular. For if Abraham lived prior to the revelation of Torah at Sinai, which is presented in the books of Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers; and Deuteronomy, what interest does Genesis have in presenting the figure of Abraham? An examination of the Abraham and Sarah traditions in Genesis 11:27–25:11 indicates that Genesis is far more interested in examining the character and role of G-d rather than Abraham.¹⁰ Abraham appears as a very idealized, righteous, and magnanimous figure. In this respect, Abraham functions in a very appropriate role for the first monotheist/Jew. He serves as the platform from which G-d is introduced to the Jewish people and to the world at large. In its examination of the character of G-d, Genesis raises questions of divine righteousness and divine fidelity, i.e., will G-d keep the promises made to Abraham? Or not? Ultimately, Genesis demonstrates that G-d is righteous, but it keeps us in suspense for some eleven chapters as it seeks to answer these questions.

When we are introduced to Abraham in Gen 11:27–32, we are told that Abram is the son of Terah, who lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans; that Abram married Sarai; and that Sarai did not bear a child. Indeed, Sarai's/Sarah's barrenness will become the leitmotif upon which Genesis will base its examination of G-d's character. We are told

¹⁰ The definition of Genesis 11:27–25:11 is based on the appearance of the formulas, "And these are the generations (Heb. *toledoth*) of Terah," in Gen 11:27 and "and these are the generations (Heb. *toledoth*) of Ishmael" in Gen 25:12. For discussion of the *toledoth*, "generations" formulae as a narrative structural device in the book of Genesis, see Frank Moore Cross, Jr., "The Priestly Work," in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 293–325. For discussion of the character of G-d in the Abraham narratives, see also Humphreys, *The Character of G-d*, 81–154.

that Terah moved his family from Ur to the city of Haran in upper Syria, and that Terah died in Haran.

Genesis 12–14 then provides us with a detailed picture of Abram and his interaction with G-d. With the possible exception of his actions in Egypt, where he tells the Egyptians that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife, Abram emerges as an exemplary character, whereas G-d emerges as a figure who makes unfulfilled promises and continuous demands. Despite the promises and demands, G-d places Abram and Sarah in danger at every turn.

Genesis 12:1–9 begins with G-d's speech to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." This is a rather remarkable set of demands and promises, and yet it is striking that Abram does not question or resist G-d. He does not know where he is going or why, but he shows complete faithfulness in G-d, who sends him into the unknown. Indeed, G-d informs him, "I will give this land to you and your offspring," and at no point does Abram express doubt or refuse to follow the direction of G-d.¹¹ Abram shows himself to be an obedient servant of G-d when he follows G-d's instructions and moves his wife and household to the land of Canaan.

This becomes all the more remarkable in the following narrative in Gen 12:10–20 in which a famine brought about by G-d afflicts the land of Canaan to which Abram has just moved his family. G-d places him under threat, and Abram moves down to Egypt to save the lives of his family. It is here that he commits an act that many condemn when he declares that Sarai is his sister rather than his wife because he is afraid that the Egyptians will kill him to take his beautiful wife. Many contend that the designation of the wife as sister is a common ancient Near Eastern language convention that expresses the intimacy

¹¹ For discussion of the promise of land to the patriarchs, see Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); see also Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant Between G-d and Israel," in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. L. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 27–64.

of the relationship.¹² Although such an observation may well be correct, it misses the point of the narrative that Abram feels threatened in a foreign land and makes his statement as a means to protect himself from the Egyptians. Of course, Gen 20:12 later explains that Sarah is Abraham's half sister so that his statement is not a lie. Nevertheless, his words enable Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to take Sarai into his harem while Abram prospers. We are not told what happens to Sarai in the royal harem, but ultimately Pharaoh learns the truth, returns Sarai to Abram, and allows Abram to leave unharmed. Despite the questions raised about Abram, he perceived himself and his family to be under threat, and he acted in a manner that in his estimation would best insure his and his family's safety. Indeed, interpreters generally overlook an important point of the narrative, viz., Sarah's descendants could have been Egyptians. The question of Egyptian offspring for the ancestors will appear again in Genesis.¹³

We next see Abram in Genesis 13 tending sheep in the Negev wilderness with his nephew Lot. Because of Abram's prosperity, the flocks grow numerous. Ultimately, the shepherds of Abram and the shepherds of Lot begin to fight among themselves as they compete for pastureland. In order to avoid the quarrel, Abram tells Lot to choose which part of the land he would like. Lot looks for the well-watered and greener land of Sodom and the Jordan Valley, and chooses it for himself, leaving Abram to live on the land that was left over. This is a very remarkable and unselfish act by Abram when considered in the context of an ancient patriarchal society in which Abram as the senior male had the right to choose the best land for himself. Although neither Abram nor Lot would yet know—despite the narrative cues given to the reader in Gen 13:10, 13—that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed, the narrative allows Abram's magnanimity to shine through.

¹² See Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1970), 102–103; Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 91–94.

¹³ See Genesis 16, which relates the birth of Abram's son, Ishmael, to Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Note also that the Abraham/Sarah narratives ultimately pass the covenant on to Isaac and not to the Egyptian-born Ishmael. This stands in contrast to the birth of Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to his Egyptian wife, Asenath, in Gen 41:50–52. Both sons are eventually adopted by Jacob in Genesis 48. Nevertheless, it is striking that Abraham, who is often identified in relation to Judean interests (see Ronald E. Clements, *Abraham and David* [Studies in Biblical Theology 2/5; London: SCM, 1967]), avoids passing his inheritance on to Egyptian-born offspring, whereas Joseph, the ancestor of the major tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel, does not.

This portrayal of Abram's character continues in the next chapter. When Sodom is attacked in Genesis 14, and Lot is carried off captive by the raiding Mesopotamians, Abram does not hesitate to raise an army and rescue Lot and the other captives. When the King of Sodom offers a reward, Abram turns it down, and instead worships G-d at the site of Salem, i.e., Jerusalem (cf. Ps 76:3). Indeed, Gen 14:18 identifies Melchizedek as the priest of El Elyon at Salem (cf. Psalm 110 in which YHWH informs David that he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. In addition, Gen 14:20 notes that Abram paid a tithe at Salem, in keeping with later requirements that Israelite men pay a tenth or a tithe of their annual income to support the Temple and monarchy (Lev 27:30–33; Num 18:21–32; Deut 14:22–29; cf. Gen 28:22; 1 Sam 8:15, 17; m. Ma'aserot 1:1).¹⁴ In doing so, Abram already exhibits the piety and observance of later generations of Jews who would worship G-d at the Jerusalem Temple.

Having portrayed Abram in such generous and idealistic terms, Genesis then turns to the question of G-d's fidelity in chapters 15–17 by portraying the covenant with Abram/Abraham. Genesis 15 opens with G-d's repeated promises to Abram, "Fear not Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great."¹⁵ At this juncture, the narrator takes the opportunity to point us back to the question of Sarah's barrenness. Without a son, all of Abram's wealth, standing, and special relationship with G-d are meaningless; there is no one to inherit Abram's property or to carry on after his death. When Abram points this out to G-d, G-d reiterates the promises that Abram will become the father of a great nation that will possess the land of Canaan/Israel. G-d even signs the agreement in the manner of ancient treaties by symbolically passing between the pieces of sacrificed animals, which signifies that one who violates the terms of the treaty will suffer the same fate as the sacrificial animals (cf. Jer 34:18).¹⁶ But by raising the question of the next generation, Abram in fact raises the question of

¹⁴ See Moshe Weinfeld, "Tithe," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, cols. 1156–1162.

¹⁵ For detailed discussion of Genesis 15, see my essay, "Form Criticism," in *To Each its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, rev. edition, eds., S.L. McKenzie and S.R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 58–89.

¹⁶ For discussion of sacrifices in relation to ancient Near Eastern treaties, see Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the OT and in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970), 184–203.

divine fidelity. Thus far, Abram has done all that is asked of him; but G-d has not yet fulfilled the promises.

This tension in the portrayal of G-d is only reinforced with the birth of Ishmael in Genesis 16. Sarah continues to remain barren, and ultimately, she exercises the legal right of women in the ancient Near East to provide her husband with offspring through a maidservant.¹⁷ In this case, the maidservant is Hagar, an Egyptian woman, who bears Ishmael to Abram. For the reader of the story, the birth of the half-Egyptian Ishmael is an ironic twist, i.e., will Abram's covenant continue through an Egyptian, the very people who threatened Abram in Genesis 12 and the people who would enslave Abram's descendants in Exodus? Although Ishmael is granted his own set of promises from G-d, Genesis 17 continues with the second text that articulates the covenant between G-d and Abram. The covenant is sealed by circumcision in which Abram symbolically signs the agreement by circumcising himself and his house. His name is changed to Abraham and Sarai's is changed to Sarah, and G-d once again promises Abraham that he will have children through Sarah who will become a great nation and possess the land of Canaan/Israel forever. Again, Abraham does all that he is asked, but G-d makes promises that are not yet fulfilled.

The presentation of the Abraham tradition in the Bible reaches its climax in Genesis 18–22, which focuses its attention ever more closely on the character of G-d. Although Abraham plays a major role in these chapters, the narrative is designed to raise questions concerning G-d's righteousness and fidelity. The Sodom and Gomorrah narratives in Genesis 18–19 raise these questions in a very pointed manner. After repeating the still unfulfilled promise that Sarah will bear a son and that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation, G-d informs Abraham of the decision to destroy the purportedly wicked cities. Ironically, it is Abraham and not G-d who raises the moral question of the destruction of an entire population, "Far be it from you! Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" Abraham ultimately persuades G-d not to carry out the destruction if there are ten righteous people in the cities; perhaps G-d was testing Abraham to see what his response to such an atrocity would be.¹⁸ Despite the portrayal of Sodom as entirely

¹⁷ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 127–129; Speiser, *Genesis*, 119–121.

¹⁸ See my essay, "Isaiah and Theodicy after the Shoah," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, eds., T. Linafelt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 208–19, which raises similar questions in relation to Isaiah's vision of G-d in Isaiah 6.

wicked city in Genesis 19, we readers are nevertheless left with a very uncomfortable feeling concerning G-d's proposal to destroy entire cities. What would G-d have done if Abraham had not spoken up?

Finally, Genesis 21 presents the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham, resolving the literary tensions surrounding Sarah's barrenness and G-d's unfulfilled promises of a son. And yet, we see Hagar and Ishmael expelled with divine acquiescence. Although G-d promises that Ishmael, too, will become the father of a great nation, the reader might ask why Hagar and Ishmael must be expelled from Abraham's household. And yet G-d demands even more of Abraham. Having given him the son that had been promised, G-d tests Abraham in Genesis 22 by demanding that he offer Isaac as a burnt offering on Mt. Moriah, traditionally understood to be the site of the future Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chr 3:1). There is an irony to this test in that Abraham has never disobeyed G-d throughout the entire narrative sequence of Genesis 11–22, but G-d's integrity is once again subject to question. If Isaac is to die, the covenant potentially comes to an end; even if Sarah bears another son, the morality of Isaac's death is still in question. Although G-d stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, the reader might wonder whether Abraham is tested in this narrative or G-d. Indeed, Rabbinic tradition notes that Isaac never comes home to Sarah following this incident, and that Sarah dies thinking that her son is dead (Leviticus Rabbah 20:2; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 32).

The balance of the narrative in Genesis 23–25 traces the rest of Abraham's life, but the critical examination of Abraham and G-d is now complete. G-d finally emerges as a righteous figure, who shows fidelity in relationship with Abraham even if questions might be raised concerning G-d. But then such questions are appropriate in Jewish tradition, when one considers the continued hardships of the Jewish people throughout history, such as the Babylonian exile, the destruction of both the first and second Temples in Jerusalem, the modern experience of the Shoah or Holocaust, etc. Judaism maintains a dialogical relationship with G-d, in which G-d speaks to and makes demands of the Jewish people, and the Jewish people speaks to and makes demands of G-d. G-d and Abraham and G-d and the Jewish people are very different beings, and yet they talk and enter into relationship with each other. It is through their dialogue that the relationship thrives.

It is with this in mind that we may observe how the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1–9 both concludes the sequence of creation and introduces the Abraham tradition in Genesis. Whereas human beings

attempt to unite to build a tower to heaven, G-d separates them by giving them different languages so that they could not unite as a single people. In doing so, G-d introduces a principle of differentiation and diversity among human beings. We human beings are not intended to be the same, and yet even in our diversity we must find a way to live together within the same creation. Perhaps the tower of Babel story has something to teach us, i.e., that we must learn to talk with each other and live together in the same world while learning to accept the diversity that makes us unique.¹⁹

¹⁹ This is a revised version of my contribution to a panel discussion on "Considering Abraham: The Role of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," presented at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, March 4, 2003. I would like to thank Roberta Sabbath for her invitation to participate in this panel and panel members Frances Campbell and Farooq Hamid for their insightful presentations and comments.

PART III

TOPOGRAPHIES: LANDSCAPE AND BODY

INTRODUCTION TO PART III

Jonathan Bordo

The American Museum of Natural History has among its holdings a Siberian Shaman's coat. Fashioned of caribou hide, the coat has a map embroidered on the front. The map is cosmological in its representation depicting as a continuous field, constellations of stars, a landscape with a river passing through it, animals of the hunt, reindeer. The wearer of the coat, the Shaman, is the carrier of the picture of his world. His presence completes the picture. The map is at once fused to the locality and the wearer as the bearer. The map is cosmological because it is rooted to a spot or better to the peripeteia of mobile spots that make up the terroir of the Shaman's journeys across the land. The Shaman carries the cosmos with him. The map orients his sense of place in the universe whether or not it serves as a guide to inform him how to proceed from A. to B. on the land. This map is a paradigmatic sacred topography. The subject secures the picture while the subject is in the world supported by the picture.¹ Even considered as a museal artifact, the Siberian Shaman's coat allows one to adduce two basic features of a "sacred topography."

First the map is a cosmological representation of the world with an orientation that mediates between the universe and a subject in the world. Second the map, because it is worn, is incorporated into the world as the vestment of its wearer, a third symbolic skin. The Shaman is its bearer. The Shaman carries the world on his body. Thus the map is embodied. To speak in the idiom of the Renaissance, one might say that in the relationship between an individual and the cosmos, the macrocosm is reproduced in this microcosm. Thus sacred topography has a cosmological aspect carried by a subject whose world is secured by the picture. The picture is a model and a repetition. From these two features of the Siberian Shaman's coat, two other elements can be extrapolated.

¹ See my account of the differential disposition of pictures in "The Keeping Place" in Nelson and Olin, *Monuments and Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), especially 162–171.

The Shaman's coat anticipates its activation by an action of language which would name the features of the cosmos, depicted in the map—the names of the stars, the names of the landscape, the names of the animals, the names of the human dwellers. Such acts of language are ritual and mimetic. Sacred topography requires appropriate acts of language to renew the world as symbolic enactments.

Such symbolic enactments have the topographic purpose of naming the localities, of establishing the places of dwelling as what Robert Harrison calls *indwelling*.² Such mediating elements are name words, toponyms, words which establish somewhere as a special place for someone or group. As a museal artifact, the Siberian Shaman's coat is stripped of toponymic reference. The Shaman's coat is without an oral or speech situation. Language, what Andre Leroi Gouhran refers to as the "descriptive binder," is absent.³ Because the narrative of the Shaman's coat belongs to an oral tradition, it might well be lost or, if not lost, it is at least unavailable or unknown. The map on the Shaman's Coat recalls the Shield of Achilles reported in *The Iliad*. The Homeric narrative of the Shield of Achilles preserves the contents of the picture which is also a map, but, whereas the artifact has been lost, the writing of the Homeric epos has left a record of its depiction. The Shaman's coat is a picture without a narrative.

An image possesses a dimensional freedom which writing must always lack. It can trigger the verbal process that culminates in the recital of a myth, but it is not attached to that process; its context disappears with the narrator...⁴

Further while both are cosmological topographies, only the Shaman's map appears to require a ritual reenactment. Only the Shaman's map is "sacred" with respect to the topography of the map; it's writing of and on place. In one case there is a picture without a narrative and in the other there is a narrative without a picture.

The Siberian Shaman's coat is a strong model of a sacred topography; yet the sacred topographies that arise from the religions of the Abrahamic tradition are marked by significant communicational differences that arise from the very onto-theological character of monotheism.

² Robert Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), especially chapter 3.

³ Andre Leroi Gouhran, *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1993), 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

These religions arise from and are organized by writing that names the places as sacred. The writing is independent of and endowed with a special ontological status to determine place. It is through writing and its transmission including recitation that somewhere, whether a location in a physical expanse or a special zone of the human body, is a place for someone or group to have place. Indeed in view of the universal nature of divinity in the Yahwehist tradition, the specificity of place does not have the same symbolic significance, does not have the same allegiance to the absolute specificity of place that the Shaman's coat represents.⁵ Thus sacred topography in the Abrahamic tradition gives ontological primacy to the materiality of the word. It is the written word, not the speech act, that mediates between the divine and the human. Adhering to the word is a separate step. In the pure Saussurean moment of the speech act of the oral hypothesis, the word is the deed. In the Abrahamic tradition the written word is the witness to be corroborated by its adherents as acts of faith. The chain of testimony begins with the written word as witness.

For this reason perhaps one can clearly separate and establish a difference between sacred topography, in so much as it names localities within geographical expanses as sacred sites where the Yahwehist narrative unfolds, and sacred topographies, which constitute sites or zones on the body of its religious adherents. The essays in this section fall into these two types of topography.

Christine Dykgraff's "The Mesopotamian Flood Epic in the Earliest Texts, the Bible, and the Qur'an" takes up the divine intervention of floods to constitute the lower boundaries of collective human survival. Floods symbolically mark out a vast territory for sacred intervention. Floods also mark out the temporal boundary at the intersection between cosmology and history. Dykgraff's essay taps into a deep, human memory of ecological peril.⁶ In the second essay "The Trajectory of Hunger: Appropriation and Prophecy in the Book of Ruth," Ruth Tsoffar traces a journey of the refugee and problematizes hospitality. The essay stages the theme in terms of a topography that allows one

⁵ Here I have found helpful Tom Mitchell's thick lattice of conceptualizations of totemism. See his most recent work: W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially part 2.

⁶ See my "Ecological Peril, Modern Technology and the Post-Modern Sublime" in *The Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, eds. Berry and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1994), 165–178.

to compare the Book of Ruth to Oedipus at Colonus while showing the role of the story as contribution to the Zionist legitimization of the State of Israel and its attitude toward strangers.

The second pair of essays consists of micro topographies that address the application of the sacred word to constitute the human body as a zone for taboo and transgression. Here sacred text marks itself as naming, as acts of purification, as acts imposing taboos. These papers concern cultural reproduction and suggest how sacred texts territorialize the human body marking certain parts and functions as sacred. These papers seek to identify the "reproductive moment" of adherence where the sacred text reaches out as an affect to create a person who is a subject of religious adherence. William McBride "Possessing Members, Possessing Texts/Circumcision & Midrash" is a double forte Deleuzean account of male circumcision as outrageous territorialization. His outraged account is balanced by Betsy Bauman-Martin's subtle and complex essay on "Divine Rape" a probe of the annunciation narrative in the Book of Luke to legitimize the vagina as a zone for violation. Both essays presuppose the integrity of the human body to secure personhood. Each offers a critical topography of the human body as a violated space.

Kecia Ali's essay presents the point of negotiation between the micro-topography of the human body, on the one hand, and sacred contexts on the other. Ali engages sacred texts arguing, first, that the Qur'an is one, but not the only sacred context that provides guidance on issues relating to the human body of the most intimate kind. Second, she asserts that sexuality must be integral to the broader reformist quest for gender justice.

All five essays have surprisingly contemporary resonances whether it takes as its topic environmental catastrophe in the Dykraaf essay, a cosmopolitan ethics of asylum to assess the Hebrew Bible's account of the refugee and the stranger in the Tsoffar essay, or the micro topographies of Ali, Bauman-Martin, and McBride which presuppose contemporary personhood as the measure for understanding both the formation of and the insult to personhood of religions in the Abrahamic tradition.

One might consider sacred topography to be a late arrival in the proliferating fields of discourse in the humanities that take landscape and environment as their objects for theorization. Yet all these fields in their productive proliferation are compelled to maintain an analytical vigilance to keep separate the three overlapping modalities of the sacred

site: landscape, the monument, and the journey.⁷ Critical topography seeks to draw them into a unity by problematizing the very notion of *top-* itself to be both the *topic* as the place marker that holds the meaning and is hence the locus for meaning and the *topos* which refers to the plenitude of markings and crossroads, both invisible and apparent, that carry a place name concentrated in one distinct and singular spot. In this latter respect, the delineation of the sacred site is the source, model, and anthropological datum for dedicated topographical investigation that confirms Derrida's dictum that *il n'y a rien hors de texte* (there is nothing outside the text) by complicating it. Topography might be writing on the land, inscribed on the human body, and brought to life by Saussurean acts of pure speech.⁸

⁷ All three of these modalities are at work in my *The Wilderness as Symbolic Form* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

⁸ See my "The Homer of Potsdamerplatz—Walter Benjamin" in Wim Wender's *Sky over Berlin (Wings of Desire), a Critical Topography in Images: A Journal of Jewish Art History and Visual Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) where I work out a distinction between topography and chorography on the basis of the existential hereness of place.

TIMELESS TEXTS AND MODERN MORALS: CHALLENGES IN ISLAMIC SEXUAL ETHICS*

Kecia Ali

This essay takes two propositions as its starting point. First, any discussion of the unchangeable in Islamic contexts must begin—but cannot end—with the Qur’ān.¹ Second, sexuality must be integral to the broader reformist quest for gender justice. Mutuality of both desire and satisfaction in intimate relations is intricately intertwined with the aim of recognizing women as fully human participants in the family and society. Muslim discourses often highlight the centrality of sexuality to human experience, and stress women’s sexual rights within marriage as one element of a broader Muslim commitment to women’s equality. This treatment of sexuality legitimately draws from elements of both jurisprudence and prophetic Sunna, even as it overlooks certain important tensions within both bodies of literature.² Despite the Qur’ān-centeredness of much feminist and reformist thought, though, Muslim thinkers have paid little attention to the specific content of the Qur’ānic discussions of sex, focusing attention instead on other social and familial regulations governing marriage and divorce.

The first section of this essay will discuss reformist and feminist hermeneutic approaches to the Qur’ānic text, with special consideration to the double-movement theory of Fazlur Rahman which considers the intention behind specific regulations. The second section will attempt

* This paper was originally published in Christian Moe et al. (eds.), *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 89–99 (notes pp. 237–241). It appears here with minor alterations.

¹ Muslim scholars have long pondered the exact nature of the Qur’ān’s origins and its precise relationship to the Divine. Early philosophers and theologians considered whether God created the Qur’ān in history or whether it has always existed, co-eternal with God. The closest thing to an inquisition that Muslim civilization ever experienced was over the “createdness” or “uncreatedness” of the Qur’ānic text: what was the relationship between the heavenly archetype of the Qur’ān, the “preserved tablet,” and the text revealed to Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia? See Richard C. Martin, “Createdness of the Qur’ān,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, eds. Jane Dammen MacAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1: 467–71.

² See Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’ān, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 6–13.

to summarize the content of the Qur'ānic discussions of sex. Most of these verses stress maintaining chastity and avoiding indecency, practices which center on partner choice. Thus, the text is mainly concerned with *who* one engages with sexually, rather than with the specific acts engaged in or the affective or ethical dimensions of sexual conduct. This is the case in discussions of both male-female and same-sex sexual contact, although this essay is primarily concerned with the former. The third section will consider the limited guidance the Qur'an provides for conduct within the boundaries of approved sexual partnerships. Here, I will highlight both the divine oversight that these verses posit and the androcentric nature of the Qur'ānic guidance on sex.

I will argue that the critical principles most often discussed among reformist and feminist interpreters of the Qur'an—mutuality, justice, equality—figure little or not at all in the Qur'ānic discussion of sex. This is the case even though these values appear elsewhere in the text: 2:187 posits reciprocity between spouses when it declares “they are a garment for you and you are a garment for them,” and 30:21 describes the purpose of marriage as “dwelling” (or finding “tranquility”), noting that God put “love and mercy” between spouses. Mutuality and love, however, are disconnected from the specific guidelines that the Qur'an establishes for sexual conduct, as is any treatment of consent, which is vital in ethical reflection generally as well as feminist thought specifically. Thus, the strategies of historical contextualization and principle-extraction that are relevant to discussions of other matters of gender in family and society are not useful in interpreting the Qur'ānic regulations on sexual matters.³ The hermeneutic approach Rahman proposes of looking for “moral injunctions” rather than “legal enactments” does not resolve the difficulty.⁴ Interpretations based solely on the Qur'ānic discussions of sex—even if one limits oneself to the discussions of virtuous conduct and not the specific regulations regarding punishment for transgressions—cannot comprehend women's desire and active female sexuality in a way congruent with the principles of “protecting chastity”

³ With the possible exception of the discussions of punishment for sexual transgressions. As other scholars have argued with regard to corporal punishments such as amputation and stoning (as recorded in Sunna), one must understand these punishments as unoriginal in their ancient Near Eastern context. On punishment for illicit sex, see, e.g., Q 4:15–16 and 24:2–3.

⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Biblioteca Islamica, 1980), 47.

and “avoiding indecency.” Androcentric language also constitutes a real barrier to any supposed principle of mutuality.

Rather than seeing the Qur’ān’s specific guidelines regarding sex as manifestations of overarching principles of equality, mutuality, and justice, instead we must confront the absence of those principles from the Qur’ānic guidance on sex, which focuses instead on licitness. When the Qur’ān discusses sexual conduct apart from its categorization into chaste and illicit—that is, as it impinges on ritual obligations—it treats men as active and women as passive, rendering claims of mutuality more problematic. I will suggest, though, that the Qur’ān does not present objections to locating sex within a broader ethical field—in fact, it alludes to this field without actually describing its nature. It remains for those who view mutuality and consent as vital for morally good sexual relationships to anchor their ethical frameworks outside of the Qur’ānic discussion of sex.

Reformist Methodologies

Before asking how the Qur’ān’s guidance on matters of sexual morality and conduct is relevant, one must step back to acknowledge that how to treat the Qur’ān is a central issue for Muslim thinkers concerned with issues of gender justice and egalitarian family structures. Progressive thinkers, especially feminists, have a tendency to treat the Qur’ān in isolation from other authoritative texts. The *ḥadīth* and the works of jurists are recognized to have human, contingent elements, although the extent to which this applies to the Sunna itself (not its recorded form as the *ḥadīth*) is debated.⁵ The Qur’ān, viewed as a purely divine text, protected and inviolable, is unique in its claim upon Muslim loyalties and it has been the centerpiece of much reformist thought. Scholars have thus faced the question, when confronting once unremarkable and now unacceptable provisions in the Qur’ānic text (depending on the interpretive community, these may be slavery, corporal punishments,

⁵ On feminist reluctance to engage with *ḥadīth*, see Linda Clarke, “Hijab according to the *Hadith: Text and Interpretation*,” in *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*, eds. Sajida Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough, 214–286 (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2003); also Kecia Ali, “‘A Beautiful Example’: The Prophet Muhammad as a Model for Muslim Husbands,” *Islamic Studies* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 273–291.

or polygamy): are all of the Qur'ān's specific prescriptions unchangeable in their applicability to Muslim life?

Muslim scholars have always recognized that the Qur'ān does not explicitly address every possible situation. Implementation of its precepts has been subject to modifications, using Sunna or custom to restrict or expand the application of particular verses to cases not specifically addressed in the Qur'ān. Likewise, interpreters have disagreed over both the specific meaning of the text and the ways in which it should be applied. How to proceed in such cases gave rise to the genre of theoretical writings on jurisprudential method (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).⁶

In practical terms, too, jurists and judges have been flexible in their implementation of Qur'ānic precepts—sometimes to women's advantage, sometimes to women's disadvantage. The codification of “personal status law” in the waning years of colonialism, continuing in today's independent nation states, has had mixed effects for women. Some reforms, such as those increasing women's access to divorce for cause, have improved women's legal standing; others have had the paradoxical effect of restricting women's ability to maneuver by reducing judicial flexibility.⁷ Among those arguing for further legal reforms to benefit women, it has become commonplace to argue that the scriptural provisions governing female inheritance, divorce, and other matters need not always and everywhere be literally implemented, and that fairness may require modifications to the specific guidelines presented in the Qur'ānic text. At the same time, advocates for women also confront situations where the text seems to provide a better alternative to regressive social practices. Appeal to the Qur'ān (and sometimes *ḥadīth*) as a legitimate authority is often expedient, as for those opposing honor killings. Yet pressing for strict adherence to the text in favor, for instance, of not disinheriting daughters limits one when the time comes to declare that one is in favor of granting equal inheritance rights for children regardless of sex: if one has argued for the timeless supremacy of the

⁶ For an overview of the development of legal methodologies, see Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷ Amira Sonbol has made this argument persuasively in her introduction to her edited volume *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

text over any specific cultural practices, one cannot argue for moving “beyond” it without being caught in a major contradiction.⁸

Reformists have tried to avoid this trap by arguing for the overriding importance of Qur’ānic principles such as justice and equality.⁹ These principles, which are themselves assumed to be timeless, take precedence over specific rules, which represent necessary compromises with the conditions of Muhammad’s seventh-century Arab environment. At one extreme, this has meant discarding all legislative content and adhering only to theological doctrines. In this view, articulated most daringly by Sudanese scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, some portions of the Qur’ān are meant to be timeless (divine Sovereignty, human fallibility, the inexorability of judgment) while others are bounded in time (regulations governing slavery, for instance, or perhaps fighting with unbelievers).¹⁰

⁸ These contradictions, however, may be of more concern for scholars concerned with theoretical consistency than for activists who focus on practical outcomes. See K. Ali, “Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, eds. Omid Safi, 163–89 (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003); Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 6.

⁹ See, for instance, Mohammed Hashim Kamali’s work on the *maqāṣid* or objectives of Shari’a in this volume. With regard to gender issues specifically, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), 629–45. Mir-Hosseini critiques certain “inequalities embedded in current interpretations of shari’a” (644) and argues for the need to “engage with Islam’s sacred texts and its legal tradition” in order to “bring change from within” (644). *Fiqh*, which “is nothing more than the human understanding of the divine will,” must be distinguished from *shari’a*, which “is the transcendental ideal that embodies the justice of Islam and the spirit of the Koranic revelations.” Further, “This transcendental ideal, which condemns all relations of exploitation and domination, underpins Muslim women’s quest and the critique of patriarchal constructions of gender relation, which are to be found not only in the vast corpus of jurisprudential texts but also in the positive laws that are claimed to be rooted in the sacred texts.” (633) The critique is deserved, yet key questions remain to be asked, including: how do verses that seemingly endorse hierarchy relate to this “transcendental ideal” of justice? While I accept the notion that “the inequalities embedded in *fiqh* are (...) human constructions,” and that particular doctrines, such as those governing *ṭalāq*, are not necessary interpretations of the Qur’ānic text, I find unconvincing the much larger claim that “such unequal constructions contradict the very essence of divine justice as revealed in the Koran” (642). Although the Qur’ān undoubtedly establishes justice as vital (e.g., 57:25), it does not always or fully define the content of that justice (e.g., with regard to justice between wives in 4:129, something the jurists discussed more extensively). Insofar as the Qur’ān discusses justice, it does not explicitly define it as the same or equal treatment for each individual regardless of freedom or gender.

¹⁰ Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. and intro. Abdullahi A. An-Na’im (Syracuse University Press, 1996). I would like to thank Lena Larsen for pointing out that the distinction between Meccan/universal and Medinan/particular

A less drastic approach has sought to treat the Qur'ān not merely as a rule book but as a source of guidance for daily life in a much larger sense, by recognizing the intent governing its social rules. While it is undoubtedly true that the Qur'ānic text contains broad principles, it is also deeply concerned with the specifics of human behavior. Rather than simply ignore the particular in favor of the general, Pakistani thinker Fazlur Rahman attempted to clarify the relationship between specific provisions and basic aims in his double-movement theory.¹¹ He advocated analysis of particular regulations to determine their intended purpose during Muhammad's lifetime. Once one had determined their original intent, one would then craft a new regulation to fulfill the same purpose in diverse modern contexts. This approach—which has a parallel in the established jurisprudential technique of analogy (*qiyās*) based on a ratio legis ('*illa*)—has been deeply influential in later discussions of matters such as polygamy.¹² However, a reformist approach based on determining and promoting the principles underlying specific Qur'ānic provisions on sex is not plausible; the Qur'ānic dictates regarding sexual acts are not susceptible to the historical analysis governing Rahman's theory. The Qur'ānic approach to sexual contact may be said to be, in a key sense, ahistorical; the rationales behind its specific regulations are not subject to historical shift (except insofar as concubinage with slaves may be relegated to the past, as with slavery more generally). Rather, as I will show in the next section, the Qur'ān is concerned with limiting sex to licit partnerships; and to a lesser extent, with keeping it from interfering with matters of purity and ritual.

Chastity and Indecency

What are the basic parameters of the Qur'ān's approach to sexual intimacy? What principles lie behind its specific rules for sexual relationships? The Qur'ān's basic concern regarding sex, as distinct from

verses can be referred back to al-Shatibi (on whose work see Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law* [Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1997]).

¹¹ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 46–51.

¹² See Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Feminism," in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, eds. Earle H. Waugh and Frederick M. Denny, 123–145 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

either the jurisprudential¹³ or Sunna¹⁴ approaches, is largely to define the parameters of licit contact—*when* and especially *with whom*—and less with the affective or ethical dimensions of intimate relations. Paradoxically, given that jurisprudence and Sunna are often rejected as patriarchal and thus not useful for a feminist project, in fact they are more concerned with the ethical dimensions of sex than the Qur'ānic text. Of course, especially with *fiqh*, these ethical norms are embedded in a larger context that is deeply problematic, as it treats exclusive male dominion of a particular woman's sexual and reproductive capacity as necessary for licit intimacy.¹⁵

The jurists base their model of lawful and unlawful sex in part on the Qur'ānic statements defining good conduct and warning against transgressions. There are two semantic poles here: the virtue of *ḥifẓ al-farj*, chastity, literally “protecting (or guarding) the genitals,” stands in opposition to indecency or obscenity (*fāḥisha*), which is broader than lewdness and encompasses non-sexual corruption as well.¹⁶ Sexual morality, then, is embedded in a larger system of righteous and corrupt behavior.

Protecting chastity is a duty for both men and women (23:5–7, 24:30–31, 33:35, etc.) In 33:35, chastity is a virtue among other virtues; guarding one's genitals, like believing, submitting, having patience, being humble, fasting, and remembering God frequently, earns divine recompense. A similar set of virtuous behaviors defines “believers” in 23:1–7. Chastity is connected to other acts of bodily and behavioral modesty: the Qur'ān refers to men (24:30) and women (24:31) who cast down their gazes and guard their genitals; in the case of women, the text further stipulates appropriate dress and comportment.¹⁷

¹³ Kecia Ali, “Money, Sex, and Power: The Contractual Nature of Marriage in Islamic Jurisprudence of the Formative Period” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2002); Ali, “Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence,” Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 9.

¹⁴ The *ḥadīth* sources do present female desire and acknowledge the importance of female satisfaction, but also reproduce certain presumptions about women's acquiescence to male desire. For a preliminary investigation of some relevant texts, see Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 1.

¹⁵ See Ali, *Money, Sex, and Power*; Ali, “Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence.”

¹⁶ *Zināʾ*, the major sexual crime detailed in the Qur'ān, is a subset of *fāḥisha*. On this point in relation to same-sex acts and the Qur'ānic story of Lot, see Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, “Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims” in Safi, *Progressive Muslims*, 190–234. See also the brief discussion of Lot's townsfolk, below.

¹⁷ Q 4:34's reference to “those (fem. pl.) who guard the unseen” is also often interpreted to refer to a wife's sexual continence in her husband's absence. See the entries on

Chaste conduct does not mean complete sexual abstinence, but rather restricting oneself to lawful partners. The Qurʾān praises those “who guard their chastity except from their spouses or those whom their right hands own, for they are free from blame. But whoever desires beyond those limits are transgressors” (23:5–7).¹⁸ These verses presuppose two related but distinct types of licit sexual partner (for men). The references to spouses or wives is clear, but “those whom your right hands own” requires further explanation.¹⁹ Although some have argued that the Qurʾān uses this term solely for war captives, it came to be understood as encompassing all types of female slaves, including those given as gifts or purchased.²⁰ The presence of slavery and especially slave concubinage in the Qurʾānic text provides a potent case for considering whether all of the Qurʾān’s provisions are timeless; the existence of these verses is troubling for many today, but relevant to a reformist hermeneutic.²¹ Here, I will note only that beyond the basic

morality and *ʿawra* in Kecia Ali and Oliver Leaman, *Islam: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, in press).

¹⁸ See also Q 70:29–31. The text sometimes refers to “their/your spouses, *azwāj*, and what their/your right hands possess” and sometimes uses the slightly different phrase “their/your women, *nisāʾ*, and what their/your right hands possess.” Exegetes have generally not distinguished between these uses but seen *azwāj* and *nisāʾ* as synonymous, meaning wives, and it is thus that both phrases have been repeatedly translated into English. *Azwāj* is a masculine/inclusive plural. In some of its Qurʾānic uses it presumably refers to mates of both sexes, but it also appears referring to female spouses—as with the phrase “*azwāj* of the Prophet.” (For basic discussions of grammatical gender and Qurʾānic address, see Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 7, and sources cited there.) According to traditional understandings, then, men are the only ones addressed by these verses, which permit them lawful sexual access to both their wives and those female captives or slaves whom “their right hands own.”

¹⁹ The phrase “what your right hands own” (*mā malakat aymanukum*) appears in the Qurʾān on a number of occasions as a euphemism for slaves or war captives, and does not always refer just to females. See Q 4:3, 24–5, 36; 16:71; 23:6; 24:31, 33, 58; 30:28; 33:50, 52, 55; 70:30. Some of these references use the phrase in the second-person singular or third-person plural, or specific to the Prophet (e.g., 33:50). As to the scope of the term, Ingrid Mattson suggests that the Qurʾānic verses may make a distinction between permissible sex with war captives and (impermissible) sex with female slaves obtained in another fashion. Mattson, “A Believing Slave is Better Than an Unbeliever: Status and Community in Early Islamic Society and Law” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 131–141.

²⁰ Few discussed the possibility of women having sexual access to their male slaves, or, for that matter, either male or female owners having sexual access to same-gender slaves. Traditionally, the Qurʾānic passages that mention sexual access to “what your right hands possess” have been uniformly understood to mean that only male owners had sexual rights over their female slaves. In an article in progress, I analyze two ninth-century texts that consider a woman taking her male slave as a sexual partner.

²¹ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 3.

permission for sexual contact noted above, the Qur'ānic text does not state anything specific about sexual contact with unfree women, apart from the injunction not to force slave-girls to "whoredom."²² Notably, related Qur'ānic texts permit men to have licit access to more than one woman at a time, but restrict lawful (marital) access to any given woman to one man.²³

The Qur'ānic attention to *fāḥisha* as the opposite of guarding one's chastity lines up with legal prohibitions; what falls outside the lawful—exclusive access to a particular female based on marriage or ownership—is transgression, sometimes with a prescribed punishment. It is also, importantly, sin. The Qur'ān treats *fāḥisha* (pl. *fawāḥish*) or *fahshā'* in a number of verses. These terms refer to indecency but do not always have a sexual connotation, though the former term does in more instances than the latter. In sexual contexts, indecency may refer to either same-sex or, more usually, male-female sexual contact "beyond that" which is permissible.

Just as guarding one's chastity appears in tandem with other virtues on occasion, so indecency may appear with other vices. It is described in conjunction with wronging oneself (3:135), evil (2:169; 12:24), heinous sins (42:37), hatefulness (4:22), dishonor (24:21; 29:45), and dishonor and insolence (16:90). Indecency can be "outward or inward" (6:151; 7:33) and even "flagrant" (4:19; 33:30; 65:1). Most of these characterizations apply to instances of indecency that do not have sexual connotations; the phrase "flagrant indecency," however, seems to be reserved for sexual misconduct. The clearest linkage of "indecency" with the specific sin-crime of *zinā'* is 17:32: "do not approach *zinā'*; surely it is an indecency."

Approaching indecency is also the subject of three Qur'ānic references to the townsfolk of the Prophet Lot, who attempt to commit "indecency"

²² The only discussion of compulsion to sex is Q 24:33: "Do not compel your slave-girls (*fatayāt*, a term also used in 4:25) to whoredom (*bighā'*).²² The other sex-related uses of the concept of "whoredom" are both denials of the status of being "a whore," *baghī*, perhaps more idiomatically rendered "a slut" or, more diplomatically, "unchaste." One is Mary's own denial that she is "a *baghī*" (19:20) and another is an imputation that the term applies to her (as an unwed mother) when her own "mother was not a *baghī*" (19:28). The term is also used near "indecency" in 16:90; although the context is not overtly sexual, the joining of these terms may be significant.

²³ Q 4:24 seems to present a possible exception, but it was almost universally held by interpreters not to permit sexual access to married female captives/slaves but rather to dissolve their marriages, thus rendering them sexually lawful exclusively to their masters.

(27:54, 29:28) or transgress God's limits and the design of Creation by approaching "males" (26:165) or "men" (27:55, 29:29) instead of the "women" (27:55) or "mates" (*azwāj*) that "God created for" them (26:166). These verses discussing the appetites of the townspeople surrounding the Prophet Lot specify who may be sexually approached without transgression. They contrast categories of individuals who are not permitted ("males," "men") and those who are ("women," "those [fem. pl.] God created to be your mates"). The Qur'ānic discussion of men's approach to other men does not provide any guidelines for conduct, merely a statement of prohibition and a seeming rationale for why that prohibition applies: God created women to be men's mates. Some advocates of accepting same-sex intimate relationships have argued that the Qur'ān condemns Lot's visitors' attempted acts not because they involve same-sex contact but because they are non-consensual. In my view, however, this is reading into the text what is not there.²⁴ The Qur'ānic text does not provide any warrant for considering free consent a relevant factor in whether sexual acts constitute chaste or indecent conduct, and this is true not only in these verses but in all cases, whatever the sex of the participants. The Qur'ānic text is simply not interested in questions of consent, generosity, affection, or love in its discussion of chastity or licit sex.²⁵

The Lot verses, which focus exclusively on the sex of the partners rather than other characteristics, are more general than those commands that delineate which women may be approached without committing transgression: "your women and what your right hands possess." These verses also continue the pattern of addressing commands on sex—who not to approach as well as who may be approached—to men. This pattern continues in those verses that give guidance on sexual conduct beyond the identification of licit partners.

Navigating within the Boundaries

The Qur'ānic text is clear about boundaries and the consequences of transgressing them but provides little counsel as to how to navi-

²⁴ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, pp. 82–83.

²⁵ This does not mean that one cannot argue that these factors should override other considerations in defining (morally) good sex, merely that one ought to be cautious about rooting such claims in shallow scriptural ground.

gate within the limits prescribed. Two sets of verses, however, do instruct men regarding approaches to their wives. This use of the term “approach,” which echoes 17:32 (“do not approach *zinā*”) as well as the Lot verses, is important to understanding what the Qurʾān has to say about sex beyond its classification into chastity and lewdness: virtuous sexual conduct with spouses. These prescriptions are neither exclusively ethical nor precisely legal, though they fall under the scope of issues regulated by the jurists. Islamic jurisprudence, of course, deals with issues that range beyond law in the sense of enforceable legal codes to both issues of moral behavior and matters of worship, including ritual purity.²⁶ Both ethics and worship are linked to sex in the verses under consideration here.

Two discussions of sex (2:187, 2:222–3) specify the time and manner of acceptable sexual approaches by men—who are addressed by the text—to women, presumably wives. Relating sex to observation of the Ramadan fast, 2:187 commands men to approach or remain apart from their wives (literally, “your women,” *nisāʾikum*) during certain times, based on the necessity of completing worship.²⁷ It begins by declaring “Lawful for you on the nights of the fasts is the approach to your wives. They are garments for you and you are garments for them.” It states that men are to “associate with them and seek what God has ordained for you, and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black thread.” At this point, contact becomes unlawful and the text issues a positive command—“Then fast until night appears”—followed by a negative command: “and do not touch them while you are in retreat in the mosques.”

The other key passage governing men’s sexual conduct with wives appears in 2:222–23. In 2:222, the Prophet is given guidance as to how to respond to those who ask about menstruation: “Say: it (i.e., menstruation) is an annoyance, so keep away from menstruants and

²⁶ See A. Kevin Reinhart, “Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics,” *Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 186–203; and Jonathan E. Brockopp, “Taking Life and Saving Life,” in *Islamic Ethics of Life: Abortion, War, and Euthanasia*, ed. Brockopp, 1–19 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

²⁷ Notably, the rules presented in this verse for observing the fast are understood to apply to women as well as to the men to whom they are explicitly addressed. Interpreters have also applied different interpretive techniques to portions of the same verse or verse cluster in Q 5:5–6. I have addressed this point in a preliminary fashion in “Maleness and Embodiment in the Qurʾān: Thoughts on Gendered Interpretation” (paper presented at the workshop *Reconsidering “Islamic Feminism”: Deconstruction or the Quest of Authenticity?*, Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin, April 2007).

do not approach them until they are pure. When they have purified themselves, approach them as God has ordered.” Following this, the text of 2:223 declares, in part, that “Your wives (again, ‘women’) are a tilth for you, so come to your tilth as you wish, but do (good) for yourselves (or ‘your souls’) beforehand, and revere God and know that you will meet Him.”

These verses are addressed to men as those with control over the timing and manner of sexual encounters, yet they posit divine assessment of how well men’s resulting conduct adheres to divine commands. The first verse refers to God’s command (“approach them as God has ordered”) and the second refers to men’s desire (“come to your tilth as you wish”). Both verses stress God’s oversight, emphasizing that God will judge men’s behavior (“and know that you will meet Him”). The standards according to which behavior will be judged, however, are not clearly laid out in the Qur’ānic text beyond a concern for purity and the something that men (or perhaps men and women) are to do beforehand for the benefit of themselves or their souls.

In another context, I have suggested a distinction between the androcentrism of certain verses regulating marriage and divorce—which acknowledge patriarchy but seek to promote female autonomy—and those regarding sex which, while likewise androcentric in address and content, do not promote female freedom to act but rather counsel men to behave in particular ways, re-inscribing male control over female bodies.²⁸ Scholars have argued persuasively that the Qur’ān addresses certain verses to men, and grants certain privileges and imposes certain responsibilities on men, due to the existence of patriarchy in Arabia of Muhammad’s time. Various verses promote female freedom to make certain decisions about remaining married to particular men, or choosing to remarry; the Qur’ān thus promotes autonomy for women without challenging the basic patriarchal structure of family or society. But the Qur’ānic treatment of women as sexually passive and men as sexual actors, of women’s bodies as Other and men’s bodies as normative, poses a challenge to understanding the text as purely divine and transcendent.²⁹

²⁸ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, chap. 7.

²⁹ The Qur’ān does not portray female sexuality as purely passive, at least not in the story of Joseph and the ‘Azīz’s wife (Q 12). The substantial interpretive literature produced on this story is central to the juristic construction of dangerous female sexuality, although not all readings are misogynistic.

Sexuality and sexual desire are in part historically produced.³⁰ It could be argued that female sexual passivity was the norm for seventh-century Arabs, and that therefore the regulations surrounding sex are merely descriptive for the time, and do not reflect normative judgment. Nonetheless, the androcentrism of these passages constitutes one way in which the Qur'ānic discourse privileges male experience and highlights male agency. The relationship that Rahman posits between specific provisions and general principles does not explain away the male-centeredness of the Qur'ānic text, unless one considers androcentrism to constitute a general principle. Rather, this androcentrism stands outside the explanatory power of the double-movement theory, just as the chastity/indecency dichotomy cannot be historically contextualized as a manifestation of principles of justice or equality.

Conclusion

The Qur'ān presents two interrelated basic imperatives of “protecting chastity” and “avoiding indecency.” For men, this means not approaching partners beyond “wives/spouses” and “what their right hands possess” and not approaching men or males in preference to women. The Qur'ān's more specific commands regarding sexual conduct appear within discussions of men's contact with their wives, defining acceptable and unacceptable times for sexual approach: it is unacceptable to approach women during fasting hours, while in retreat in the mosques, or while women are menstruating; presumably, any other time is acceptable. Importantly, the text does not suggest that breaking these commands would constitute indecency. The division of sexual encounters into licit (equivalent to chaste) and illicit (indecent) stands apart from the specific guidance on sex offered in these few verses, which relate to completing ritual obligations or maintaining purity taboos, things that have generally not been considered subject to historical change. These Qur'ānic rules regarding times of abstention do not represent the

³⁰ Broadly on the historical production of sexuality, see David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Jeffrey Weeks, “The Rights and Wrongs of Sexuality,” in *Sexuality Repositioned: Diversity and the Law*, eds. Belinda Brooks-Gordon et al., 20–37 (Portland, OR: Hart 2004); and Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

type of broad, transhistorical ethical principles envisioned in Rahman's double-movement theory.

What, though, of the broader categories of chastity and indecency? Are they subject to historical contextualization? "Protecting chastity" is a virtue, as is "avoiding indecency," but are they critical objectives in themselves, or do they serve other divinely-intended purposes? If one addresses the case of slave concubinage in Rahman's framework, one might argue that that the specific permission to have sex with unfree women was part of a broader concern with limiting licit partners as much as possible to contexts where biological paternity could be ascertained and its consequences enforced. Thus, "protecting chastity" in the modern period requires limiting oneself only to spouses. Yet although paternal responsibility and filiation (*nasab*) more generally is acknowledged as an important social objective by Muslim jurists, it seems impoverishing to limit the Qur'ānic notion of protecting one's genitals to that concept. In any case, one would have to engage in exegetical gymnastics to link the principle of enforceable paternity to egalitarian visions of gender-justice.

It remains for those who view mutuality and consent as vital for good sex—and here I mean morally good rather than merely pleasurable—to anchor their ethical frameworks outside of the Qur'ānic discussion of sex. There are a number of possible approaches to this search for an ethical starting point. Of course, on the theory that one first interprets the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān, one can make a case for relating the discussions of sex to other Qur'ānic passages discussing marriage, for instance. This allows one to draw on principles which are clearly present in the text, but it also presents the problem of competing principles. God is said to have placed "love and mercy" between spouses (30:21), and this is certainly a desirable anchor for privileging mutuality in sex. Yet on what basis does one prefer this description of the spousal tie over the *qiwāma* or authority and responsibility mentioned in 4:34 or the "degree" men have over women in 2:228? These questions cannot be resolved by simply privileging principles over specifics, but raise the matter of interpretive choice again, at a slightly different level.

How does one ultimately choose between competing principles? There comes a point at which it becomes necessary to step outside the text. In reality, one always brings elements of one's own formation—social, intellectual, personal—to one's readings. Doing so deliberately, with careful attention to one's conscience, through the lens of other religiously meaningful texts, may prove very important. *Ḥadīth* and

jurisprudence are dismissed by some reformers, including some feminists, as corrupted because of human elements in their formulation and transmission—unlike the uncorrupted and pristine Qur'ānic text—yet, notwithstanding their patriarchal and even misogynist elements, they may prove important for the working out of ethical approaches to real women's sexuality in real historical situations. Likewise, for many Muslims the texts that have the most meaning may be Sufi writings, poetry, or *qaṣīdas*. There are elements in these works that can provide inspiration and a broader framework for ethical approaches to Muslim life. I have argued elsewhere that reform in sexual ethics must rely on a coherent, consistent, and methodologically rigorous approach to core texts. But situating sexuality within a broader textual base than the Qur'ān alone can help relate it to other ethical structures.

In addition to deriving principles from the text, one must also understand that there are limits to what it can provide. If the Qur'ān provides only rules about purity and timing and not advice about being a generous lover, committed to caring for one's (licit) partner, that does not mean the latter is not important, only that one must fill in the gaps for oneself in a way that is compatible with, if not explicitly present in, its core guidance. And those who approach the text as feminists must locate and justify the principles from which they begin. How can one argue persuasively for an egalitarian reading of marriage and gender relationships in the Qur'ān without distorting the text? How can one make a strong case for mutuality and partnership as the preferred Qur'ānic mode of marriage, and for meaningful consent as a necessary condition for ethical sex? An egalitarian ethics must be grounded in a theological approach to the Qur'ānic text, and reformist thought in general must engage more explicitly with theological concerns. Ultimately, it is only at the level of discussions about God and God's relationship to humanity that key questions about basic principles can be addressed. Why does equality matter, besides the fact that some of us have been conditioned by modernity to want it? I want to conclude by offering one, very preliminary, possibility: an understanding of *tawḥīd* and *islām*, with a lower-case "i". The fundamental individual role of submission to God alone, devotion to the spiritual life, and ordering of one's personal relationships in a way that is pleasing to the divine as well as to one's own sense of spiritual need, can best be accomplished when one has the personal liberty to make particular choices. The radical submission demanded of the individual believer is more meaningful when personal constraints are fewer. The implications of *tawḥīd* for exegesis and

ethics remain to be worked out in a comprehensive fashion—and indeed there are other likely points of departure—but in thinking about the union of two selves in physical intimacy, remembering the separateness and Oneness of God to whom all Muslims must ultimately submit as individuals may serve as a place to begin.

MARY AND THE MARQUISE: READING THE ANNUNCIATION IN THE ROMANTIC RAPE TRADITION

Betsy J. Bauman-Martin

In biblical studies, discussions of Mary have become limited in the last decade to discussions about her suitability as a role model for modern women.¹ In the most recent studies Mary serves as the locus of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world to free the enslaved, redistribute wealth and bring justice to the oppressed. It is thus not currently popular to return to the older, some say out-dated and put-to-rest idea that sexual imagery informs the interaction between God and Mary in the annunciation scene.

But I will argue that reading from a literary perspective while still taking the historical context seriously, we can construe the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary in Luke 1 as participating in the assumptions of romantic rape, a motif which stretches from Ovid's "The Rape of Callisto" to Heinrich Kleist's "The Marquise of O—," and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. I define "romantic rape" as a deeply entrenched literary theme that impacts all Western literary forms—poetry, prose, epic, etc.,—which depicts the sexual exploitation of a woman but presents that sexual exploitation as acceptable, or even enjoyable, to the woman. Within the romantic rape paradigm, rape is elided into ecstasy, protest and consent are confused and the woman's point of view is spoken/interpreted by a male narrator. The interaction between Mary and the angel Gabriel in the annunciation scene in Luke 1 joins in the romantic rape tradition because the penetration of the woman's sexual organ occurs in a situation of inequality, the woman passively concurs in her objectification, making consent unclear, the narrative, including the women's point of view, is presented by a male, and the text refuses to describe the actual sexual act, leaving instead a textual-sexual hole. The "rape" of Mary does not serve as a source of romantic rape narratives (it being preceded and influenced by earlier

¹ A suitable example is Els Maeckelberghe's *Desperately Seeking Mary*, an excellent overview and analysis of diverse feminist interpretations of the Virgin (Pharos, 1994).

romantic rape models), but it affirms many of the same timeless assumptions about women's bodies, the respective roles of men and women in sex, the relationship of sex to power and violence, and definitions of consent.

The pertinent passage is as follows:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, the name of which was Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the name of the virgin was Mary. He went in to her and said, "Rejoice, privileged one, the Lord is with you." She was thoroughly troubled by what he said, and wondered what kind of greeting this could be. The angel said to her,

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.
Look, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son,
and you will call his name Jesus.
He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High.
The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David;
He will rule over the house of Jacob forever;
And there will be no end of his kingdom.

Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I have no sexual relationship with a man?"

The angel answered her,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you:
therefore the child to be born will be called holy—Son of God.
Look, your relative Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son; indeed this is the sixth month for her who was called barren.
For nothing is too hard for God.

Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26–38.²

Recent scholarship on the annunciation agrees that the scene is largely influenced by Jewish sources within and without the Tanakh, and because ancient Jews eschewed sexual ideas about their God, "such a [sexual] reading would be impossible. . . ."³ Scholars claim that the ancient

² New Revised Standard Version.

³ References in the Hebrew Bible include the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. 40:35), Mt. Zion (Is. 4:5), the Israelites themselves (Num. 10:34), chosen ones (Deut. 33:12), and the Cherubim over the mercy seat (Ex. 25:20). Cited in Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (Harper & Row, 1987), 327–228. John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 35a, (Nelson Reference, 1989), 43. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*:

Greek models of sexual penetration of women by male gods used a different vocabulary and clearly describe physical sexual activity. The few exceptions (penetration by a god's spirit, breath, or power), are circularly dismissed as too non-Jewish to have influenced Luke.⁴ Raymond Brown, the godfather of infancy narrative studies, argued dogmatically against any sexual reading of Luke 1, and insisted that the language of the annunciation represents the language of early Christology.⁵

What Brown and others ignore is that the sexual sense of this scene, or any other, is not determined by vocabulary. In English the word "penetrate" does not necessarily mean sexually; it can mean the penetration of a nail in a wall (likewise, "screw"). The sexual impression depends on what is being penetrated. In the case of the conception of Christ, the penetration of a womb for reproductive purposes necessarily makes this passage sexual, regardless of the lack of lust on the part of the penetrator. Sexuality and the theme of penetration pervaded the ancient world in countless myths and metaphors.

In addition, by looking for linguistic similarities with ancient literary scenes of overt sexuality or clear rape, most exegetes miss the point. A better parallel to the penetration of Mary is the act of possession for purposes of prophecy. Dale Martin notes that "one can hardly read accounts of physiology of prophecy, especially descriptions of prophecy enacted by a male god on a female seer, without detecting the sexual connotations of the language."⁶ Mary Foskett quotes Lucan's account of the oracle at Delphi to illustrate further:

At last Apollo mastered the breast of the Delphian priestess; . . . he forced his way into her body, driving out her former thoughts. Frantic as she

A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke (Doubleday, 1977), 290. Lucy Rose, however, has pointed out that the Magnificat follows guidelines from the *rhētorica ad Herennium* (cited in Vernon Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Criticism: Mary, Elizabeth and the Magnificat as a Test Case," in Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight, (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 109, 176). Mary Foskett notes that "[the Septuagint] was surely not the only text on either his literary horizon or that of his readers." *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Indiana U Press, 2002), 13.

⁴ "There is at this point general agreement in critical scholarship that no satisfactory background for Luke 1:35 can be provided from the mythologies of antiquity," Nolland, 43–44. Philo's depictions of the interaction between God and the soul are rejected as "simply" allegorical, which of course, misses the point of the significance of the choice of allegory.

⁵ Specifically, "the christology of divine sonship," Raymond Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, Anchor Bible Reference Library, Doubleday, 1993, 305, 312.

⁶ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale, 1999), 239.

careens about the cave, with her neck under possession.... She groaned and uttered loud inarticulate cries with panting breath, next a dismal wailing filled the vast cave; and at last, when she was mastered, came the sound of articulate speech... then Apollo closed up her throat.⁷

Lucan uses unambiguously sexual imagery to describe what many do not think of as a sexual act, but which is sexual in Mary's case because God penetrated and possessed Mary's reproductive organ(s) and implanted the seed of a living being. Peter Brown defines possession as a "flooding of the body with an alien, divine Spirit."⁸ Those who want to ignore the physical upheaval should be reminded that possession by God is always dramatic and physically forceful. Plutarch described the readiness for possession in the same terms as readiness for sexual intercourse, and the attitude of the oracle/prophet/possessee as one of "surrender."⁹

The critical phrase in the annunciation scene is "The Holy Spirit will come upon (ἐπερχέσθαι) you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow (ἐπισκιάζο) you." In Greek literature ἐπερχόμαι often denotes a naturally overpowering process, such as death, darkness, or some sort of great force, such as an army.¹⁰ Likewise, in almost all instances of ἐπερχέσθαι in the Septuagint, the connotation is negative, often of an attack. Affliction, plague, curse, enemy troops, evil, robbers, and destruction are said to "come upon" people.¹¹ The word also denotes overpowering energy even where it is used in a positive sense; for example the coming of ecstasy from the Lord.¹² Luke often uses ἐπερχέσθαι to speak of something dreaded or overpowering assailing a person.¹³ Luke's use here of a verb that he usually associates with dread does not denote a comfortable, benign interaction. This verb, even if not overtly sexual, can be used to denote physical possession or

⁷ Lucan, *The Civil War* 5.160–97, cited in Foskett, 37–38.

⁸ Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia, 1988), 67.

⁹ Examples of those experiencing powerful possessive episodes include Saul, the Hebrew biblical prophets, Jesus on the cross, the disciples at Pentecost, and the apostle Paul. Plutarch *De def. orac.* 436f.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Vita*, 26; Appian, *Hisp.* 11.61; Hyperides, *Speeches* 6.37; *Homeric Hymns* 1.49; *Iliad* 10.40; 13.470; Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, line 469.

¹¹ Gen 42:21, Lev. 14:43, Judges 9:57, 1 Kings 30:23, 2 Kings 19:7, 22:1, Job 22:17, etc.

¹² It is used in an apparently sexual sense in Hos. 10:11, where God warns, "I will come upon (ἐπερχέσθαι) the fairest part of her neck; I will mount Ephraim."

¹³ 11:22, 21:26, Acts 8:24, 13:40. It is used only one other time in the New Testament of the Holy Spirit, again in Luke Acts 1:8 to refer to Jesus predicting the coming Spirit at Pentecost.

overpowering, either of which, when referred to a woman's womb, amounts to forcible, irresistible penetration, possibly rape.

The second verb, ἐπισκιάζω, occurs in the Synoptic accounts of the transfiguration when a cloud "overshadowed" the three disciples with Jesus. In the Septuagint, God overshadows the tabernacle, leading some to posit Mary as a new tabernacle.¹⁴ In Isaiah 32:15–16 it is used to describe the Spirit of God acting upon the wilderness to produce a fertile field. Some scholars compare the coming upon and overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit with the Spirit's hovering over the primordial waters, over the formless void in the earliest moments of creation, producing life. For these interpreters, Mary's womb represents this void, and this association proves for them that "The coming upon is not sexual; there is more of a connotation of creativity.... The earth was void and without form when that Spirit appeared, just as Mary's womb was a void until through the Spirit God filled it with a child who was His Son."¹⁵ However, "[Mary] seems to be reduced, in this line of thinking, to an emptiness, a space, a nurturing container, ultimately excluded from consideration in the formation of this child... She is honored for the nonuse of her sexuality.... [and] for her receptivity."¹⁶

Against this view of Mary as non-sexual empty vessel, other scholars read what the ancients would have read: that Mary was *impregnated* by the creative word of God; that the Spirit of God entered into her as into soil, establishing a parallel with Genesis 1. "Both in Genesis 1 and in the conception of Jesus the "word of God" was the seminal agent."¹⁷ In the ancient world, the earth was usually the divine female, a mysterious womb, receiving the seed, nurturing it, and eventually bringing forth the fruit. A sexual union between sky and earth brought everything into being. Many ancient authors saw a profound similarity between what the farmer did to the earth when he plowed her and what he did to his wife when he had intercourse with her and impregnated her. In Greek, ἀρόω can mean to plow the field but also to beget children; in

¹⁴ Exodus 40:35.

¹⁵ Schaberg, 314. Karl Rahner, in *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, writes that apart from the function of being the mother of God, Mary "is nothing," (Herder and Herder, 1963), 67–69.

¹⁶ Schaberg, 10–12.

¹⁷ Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Brill, 2004), 10–11.

the passive voice it can express the idea of being begotten.¹⁸ Thus, the annunciation scene can be more consistently read within the ancient context as a sexual encounter the possession of Mary's sexual organ, the connotations of power in the word ἐπερχόμαι, and the scene's noted evocations of the sexually nuanced account of creation. Once the sexual implications are acknowledged, a naturally subsequent corollary is to inquire whether the sexual encounter is consensual.

The traditional reading is that Mary's response to Gabriel's message is unequivocal, even joyful, consent: "Behold, I am the handmaid (δούλη) of the Lord; let it happen to me according to your word" (γενοιτό μοι κατὰ τὸ ρῆμά σου). John McHugh translates Mary's consent as "O, may it be so."¹⁹ Likewise, Rosemary Ruether argues that Luke goes out of his way to stress that Mary's motherhood is a free choice.²⁰ Raymond Brown declares that "Mary's obedient, and even enthusiastic, acceptance of God's word in 1:38 is highlighted by the context in which Luke has placed it," the context of the Magnificat.²¹ Alfred Plummer, on the other hand, interpreted Mary's response completely in terms of submission.²² Mary Daly equates that submission with a rape. The Lucan annunciation scene, she claims, depicts the rape of the mind/spirit/will of a terrified young girl, who like all rape victims in male myth, submits joyously to degradation. Daly calls this "religious rapism", which makes physical rape unnecessary.²³

¹⁸ Impregnating a woman is to "sow the female soil" wrote Lucretius in *De Rerum natura* 4.1107. Indeed, parallels between women's reproductive organs and the earth appear in texts like Job 1:21: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return..." Benko, 206–212. See *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, edited by Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

¹⁹ John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1975), 214. McHugh bases his interpretation on the optative mood of the verb γενοιτό, but most commentators see this construction as more an expression of permission than fervent wish.

²⁰ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, Beacon Press; Reissue edition (April 1, 1993) 152–154.

²¹ Raymond Brown, *Birth*, 319. But Schaberg reminds us that reading backwards from the opening line of her Magnificat is dangerous, and it is better to read these two scenes separately, between which the pregnancy occurs in silence, 132–135.

²² Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke* (T&T Clark, 1922). And, of course, Mary's conversation with Gabriel fits what we know about God communicating with women in general: women characters hold direct discourse with god or his agent only in a procreative context.

²³ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press; Reissue edition, 1990), 84, 111, 130, 185.

There are four elements in the annunciation narrative that signal that the scene is not as benign as traditional exegetes might like, and that tension predominates: Mary's emphatic virginity and sexual inexperience, the angel's words to Mary "Do not be afraid," Mary's subsequent claim that she is God's "maidservant," and her words "let it be unto me." First, ancient prophecy was often tied to virgin women, in part because of their purity, but also their liminality. Mary Beard notes that the Vestal Virgins indicate that in the ancient world "the boundary between virginity and non-virginity" was constantly being negotiated, and the woman's body signalled the accessibility of the vessel for the god's possession.²⁴ Thus, the virgin's body is valued only if it is pure—a representation of the boundary between the human and divine, effective only if it retains its integrity for the god. Thus Mary's own importance is dependent on the "closedness" of her sexual space to male humans, yet the open-ness of that same space to the Holy Spirit.

Second, Mary's situation is inherently dangerous. She is very young, and like the women in other romantic rape situations, she is "come upon" alone. A strange and powerful, seemingly male (Luke uses male personal pronouns for the angel), being enters her home/bedroom. Gabriel/God penetrates first her private world, suggesting also the subversion of the husband's role by God. Given the sexual violation of virgins portrayed in ancient fiction and myth, Luke's description raises the specter of violence to virginity, and the initial comments of the angel attribute understandable fear to Mary. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, gendering both God and Gabriel as male in their reading, see this as a social situation in which a male encounters a young woman alone and threatens her virginity.²⁵ They understand the angel to "persuade" Mary to consent to be overpowered by the Most High, and that Mary "gives in" when "cornered" by the angel.²⁶ While divine lust does not

²⁴ Mary Beard, "Re-Reading Vestal Virginity," In *Women in Antiquity: A New Assessment*, ed. Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick (Routledge, 1995).

²⁵ Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Fortress Press, 1992), 289, cited in Robbins, 187–188. Traditional and non-traditional readers implicitly or explicitly read God as male in relation to Mary.

²⁶ Mary Lefkowitz has argued that most of the Greek rape stories involve *persuasion* on the part of the god, rather than force, in "Seduction and Rape in Greek Myth," in Angeliki E. Laiou, ed., *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 17–37). But elements of seduction are combined with violence and the encounters lack mutuality. In Greek myth the distinction between seduction and rape was often "glossed over," Daniel Ogden, "Rape, Adultery and the Protection of Bloodlines in Classical Athens," in Laiou, ed., 25–42.

play a role here, the scenario still points to traditional Mediterranean attitudes toward the manipulation and control of women's sexuality and reproduction.

Third, Mary's description of herself as a "slave of the lord" expresses a sense of powerlessness and nothingness, appropriate to a vessel, rather than a morally capable person. Mary's statement reflects Luke's own androcentric insensitivity to the perpetual condition of women, especially female slaves. The master/slave relationship is ultimately inimical to authentic free will and moral choice. "It was precisely this lack of ability to consent freely which was often described as distinguishing sexual relations with a slave, a distinction which was often seen as making these relations less satisfying".²⁷

Schaberg argues that Luke's choice of δουλὴ is intended to have a positive dimension, seen in connection with the phrase δοῦλος θεοῦ used for a few outstanding men of Israelite history who were totally committed to god.²⁸ But a δοῦλος in a non-reproductive context does not face possession, sexual objectification, and sexual coercion. The term δουλὴ always and everywhere carries associations that δοῦλος does not: associations of sexual use and abuse. The very boundaries of the female slave's personhood and her bodily/psychic safety were more endangered. Judith Wegner notes regarding Second Temple Judaism that everyone knew that "female slaves, female captives, and girls raised by Gentiles had been subjected to sexual abuse—even those under the age of three."²⁹

The Catholic Church has consistently maintained that the power of the annunciation depends on Mary's willingness, which comes in her statement "Let it be to me according to your word." But there is no indication in the text that the angel is waiting for Mary's permission, or even that it is an offer. Everything that he says in 1:31–35 is in the future indicative: "You *will* conceive...you will bear...you will call."

²⁷ Cohen, 6, citing Xenophon, *Hiero* 1.27–37, *Oec.* 10. The remarks by some commentators seem disingenuous on this point. Foskett, for example, interprets Mary's "consent" as the attribution of subjectivity to her by Luke (123). But Mary's voice in this passage is "ventriloquised" by Luke, and guess what he has her say? "I'm your slave!"

²⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 289, cited in Robbins, 187–188.

²⁹ Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford, 1988), 112.

And Mary's "consent" is prefaced by an admission that she does not expect a choice: she is a slave.³⁰

Beyond the context of the story itself in Luke, the notion of consent must be analyzed as a function of power relationships. Consent is often most insidiously and effectively defined in literary works. Scholars have analyzed Ovid's story of the rape of Callisto in this way: because Callisto experiences sexuality under patriarchy, her experience can be termed "rape" because of reasons which reflect man's power over women, but which do not necessarily require the use of physical violence to prove that power.³¹ Ancient Greek ideas of rape include ὕβρις, which Aristotle seemed to define as non-consensual intercourse, with or without the threat of violence, but in the context of unequal power relationships.³² Modern studies of consent show that consent occurs on a continuum that traces a wide variety of power relations—from willing consent to rape. Social scientists have proposed four elements of consent: knowledge of what is consented to, intent to consent, communicating one's consent, and a background of free choice.³³ Does Mary consent to non-participatory penetration? Is it meaningful consent? Reluctant consent? Pressured consent?

David Archard designates three kinds of sexual interaction which mitigate consent. The first is characterized by a significant measure of inequality between the parties to the exchange. The second pertains to situations in which the parties occupy the respective roles in an institutionally or professionally defined relationship—such as doctor and patient, professor and student, etc. The third sort of case is one in which the individual who consents has a weakness, vulnerability, or psychological attribute which disposes him/her to consent to harmful

³⁰ Telford Work, "The annunciation as Election: The Virgin Mary and Predestination in Christian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54:3, 2001, 285–307.

³¹ Kathleen Wall, *The Callisto Myth from Ovid to Atwood* (McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), 21.

³² Rosanna Omitawoju, "Regulating Rape: Soap Operas and Self Interest in the Athenian Courts," in *Rape in Antiquity*, eds. Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce (Duckworth, 1997), 1–24; 4–5.

³³ Mark Cowling, *Date Rape and Consent* (Ashgate, 1998), 82, 89; Stevi Jackson discusses 'sexual scripts,' which are "bound up with cultural notions of femininity and masculinity that provide the motivations for sexual conduct." The man "is expected to initiate sexual encounters...; her part is merely to acquiesce or refuse." "The Social Context of Rape: Sexual Scripts and Motivation," in Patricia Searles and Ronald J. Berger, eds, *Rape and Society: Readings on the Problem of Sexual Assault* (Westview Press, 1995), 16–27; 18.

or damaging interactions.³⁴ The first situation, which is the most applicable to Mary's situation, would make consent nearly impossible for her, because of the fear of the consequences of refusal or the influence of God's presence and power on the way Mary might think. Women scholars have also stressed that genuine consent is to be distinguished from "habitual acquiescence, assent, silent dissent, submission or even enforced submission."³⁵

Indeed, theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Carole Pateman have argued that the gendered socialization of the sexes is such that men and women can never approach sexual relationships or a position of equality. This is certainly true in Mary's case—both ontologically and in terms of gender and cultural context.³⁶ And most social scientists agree that authority relationships of a sufficiently stark kind invalidate consent, especially religious authority. For example, women in sexually conservative religions are generally more vulnerable to male pressure or violence. Likewise, age, mental capacity, authority relationships, physical strength, economic status, domestic status, the law and cultural norms can all significantly impact the amount of personal power a woman feels she has vis-à-vis her "lover."³⁷ In Luke's text, Mary has no real choice. From the perspective of patriarchal tradition, Mary is fortunate to be the mother of the messiah. God doesn't ask and Mary accepts objectification and the use of her sexual organs, reinforcing and reinforced by social systemization of the male access to and possession of women's bodies.

Interestingly, male interpreters regularly celebrate Mary's Magnificat as a statement of liberation for her and for all who are poor in social, political or economic status.³⁸ One major point of the Magnificat of course, is that Mary will receive praise for her role, yet Mary receives honor only in the great tradition in which women serve as reproductive vessels. Thus, while there are some moments of resistance within Mary's story, patriarchy remains fully in place.³⁹

³⁴ David Archard, *Sexual Consent* (Westview Press, 1998), 55.

³⁵ Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71–89; 72.

³⁶ See Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Arrow, 1988), 73, 143.

³⁷ Cowling, 125–126.

³⁸ L. Michael White, Gail O'Day and Richard Horsley have all read the Magnificat in as a song of liberation of the poor and oppressed, and possibly even as revolutionary.

³⁹ Victor Turner argues instead that "those in power permit, indeed encourage, those of lower status to speak out and perform their frustrations in a context of reversal....

The problem of consent is the crux of the romantic rape tradition, and Luke affirms the assumptions, language and archetypes of romantic rape. Romantic rape is sexual penetration in which some form of coercion is involved and the coercion is disturbingly depicted as consent, but the consent is questionable given the circumstances of power. In the *Rape of Lucrece* “Shakespeare reads [Lucrece’s] resistance as passivity, and totalizes that passivity into ‘yielding.’”⁴⁰ Likewise, in Livy’s “Rape of the Sabine Women,” Livy describes the women as consenting, yet “the elements of force and deception render it ambiguous; rape hovers just beneath the surface of the narrative.”⁴¹ In addition, because romantic rape stories are told/voiced by men, the woman’s desires or points of view as presented in the stories must be read suspiciously. In Luke, the reader is asked to believe that Mary speaks, but does she? Her story is told from the perspective of three male figures—Gabriel, God and Luke (and perhaps Luke’s male sources)—who are arranging her life in a dramatic way. The Lukan annunciation to Mary is too beautiful, too brief, and too vague to properly convey the distress Mary must have felt at encountering God’s messenger, or the thought of bearing an illegitimate child at the least.⁴²

Furthermore, various aspects of patriarchy in literature allow men to sexually coerce women, without violent rape. Kathleen Wall notes that the more socially powerless they are, the more female characters are prone to sexual coercion.⁴³ In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, for example, Alec D’Urberville’s power is expressed largely through his wealth, and through the claim he has over Tess as representative of her destitute family. It is a “godliness” that he exercises by forcing her to do things she does not want to do—to take strawberries from his hand or to accept his kisses. Ellen Rooney remarks that “in many readings of Tess... complicity is reduced to feminine acquiescence.... The feminine part is to consent or refuse (to be taken) rather than to desire or will

The enactment of reversal...strengthens the ideology of...the necessity of having powerful people over weak people,” cited in Robbins, 198–199.

⁴⁰ Coppelia Kahn, “Lucrece: The Sexual Politics of Subjectivity” in *Rape and Representation*, eds. Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver (New York: Columbia U Press, 1991), 41–59; 54. In fact, the coercion is necessary, as is its reading as consent, both to uphold male sexual performance and control and women’s acquiescence to that system. It is as if the man were to say “I want you to say yes, but even if you say no, I’ll do it anyway.”

⁴¹ Saunders, 154. Thus, the Greek word *epherchomai* is perfectly ambiguous.

⁴² Schaberg, 136–144.

⁴³ Wall, 174.

(to take).⁴⁴ This blurring of the boundary between seduction and rape allows some to exclude rape from discussions of coercive sexuality, but feminists insist that sexuality exists in a culture in which “eroticism is wedded to power” and “romantic love finds expression through male dominance and female submission.”⁴⁵

Beyond the conflations of seduction and rape and submission and consent, romantic rape stories can also eroticize rape. Kathryn Gravdal focuses on the *glissement* of the meaning of ravishment from seizure to ecstasy.⁴⁶ Not only does the male “use of force” become unclear, but the woman’s response is heightened into pleasure.⁴⁷ Nina Philadelphoff-Puren, writing about modern romance novels, notes that romance scenes assuage readers’ concerns that the heroes of the novels are sexually violent. In these scenes in which the woman initially resists, and then gradually shifts to desire for the man, the actions of the male become *legitimated* within a romantic framework, “chiefly through the heroine’s emphasis on her own ‘real’ desires which allegedly dwelled beneath her frightened resistance.”⁴⁸ In *glissement*, the story *reveals*, through the male point of view, what the woman really wanted, even though she may not have realized it at first. In hundreds, perhaps thousands of texts, male and female authorship notwithstanding, the male voice has women submit to coerced sex or rape and then claim to have been loved, singled out or honored.

To protect the gloss that coerced sex is desired by women, in many literary texts rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction, or censorship. Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver refer to this as the simultaneous presence and disappearance of rape.⁴⁹ The most striking recurrent motif in the romantic

⁴⁴ Ellen Rooney, “Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence” in *Rape and Representation*, eds. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (Columbia University Press, 1991), 93, my emphasis.

⁴⁵ Rooney, citing Susan Griffin, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (Harper and Row, 1979), 99.

⁴⁶ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, New cultural Studies Series (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 2–6.

⁴⁷ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Nina Philadelphoff-Puren, “Contextualising Consent: The Problem of Rape and Romance” *Australian Feminist Studies* (March 2005): 31–42. [Journal on-line]; available from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/carfax/cafs/2005/00000020/00000046/art00004>; accessed 24 April 2005.

⁴⁹ Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver, “Introduction: Reading Rape”, in Higgins and Silver, 3.

rape collection is the elision of the scene of violence. Thus, for women, taking rape seriously often “necessitates a conscious critical act of reading the violence and the sexuality back into texts...where it has been turned into a metaphor.” The task for analysts is to reclaim the physical, material bodies of women from their status as tropes and reveal the ways in which coercion and power damage the female subject.⁵⁰ In Luke’s annunciation scene, the angel does not really explain *how* the pregnancy is to come about. Luke says nothing explicitly about the actual circumstances of the conception of Jesus. Some critics have called attention to the abrupt ending. Legrand remarks that when the angel exits in 1:38, “it seems that the narrative breaks off: one does not know what happened to Mary, what were her reactions and those of others; keeping strictly to the text, the reader does not even know if the conception has taken place or how.”⁵¹

Perhaps the most notorious of all rape elisions, is the “dash” in “The Marquise of O—” by Heinrich von Kleist, originally published in 1810. In the story, the fort in the city where the Marquise has been living with her two daughters and her parents since the death of her husband, comes under attack by Russian troops. When the Marquise tries to flee a burning building, she is seized by enemy soldiers who “assault her in the most shameful way.” Count F—, a Russian officer, arrives on the scene and scatters the men with “furious blows from his sword.” To the Marquise, “he seemed an angel sent from heaven.” He leads the Marquise into another room in the building, where she promptly “collapsed in a dead faint.” Kleist continues, “Then—the officer instructed the Marquise’s frightened servants, who presently arrived, to send for a doctor...replaced his hat and returned to the fighting.”⁵² Later in the story, we learn the Marquise is pregnant, and, although the reader suspects, only near the end of the story do we discover that the Russian count is the father of the child. The Marquise then marries the Count. The dash between the words “Then” and “the officer” thus forms the crux of the narrative.⁵³ The reader soon understands that the dash

⁵⁰ Higgins and Silver, 4.

⁵¹ L. Legrand, *L'Annonce a Marie* (Paris: Cerf, 1981), 96–98, quoted in Schaberg, 90.

⁵² Heinrich von Kleist, “The Marquise of O—,” in *“The Marquise of O—” and Other Stories*, trans. and with an Introduction by David Luke and Nigel Reeves (Penguin, 1978), 69–70. In romantic literature, visions and fainting are symbolic of the failing of awareness. One could read Mary’s “vision” of Gabriel as a similar shift in consciousness.

⁵³ Interpreters have called the dash “ominous,” “famous,” “eventful,” “significant,” “punctuating.”

is the Count's "rape" of the Marquise. By reading the dash as rape, the story gains coherence.

The "Marquise of O—" fits the form of romantic rape narratives in its confusion between coerced and passively accepted sex, the bewilderment over the results of the sex, in this case, the pregnancy, the ultimate pleasure the Marquise feels from the relationship with the Count, and the Count's dark, powerful heroism. Parallels with the annunciation should be obvious: the Marquise is frightened, she considers the Count an "angel," the resulting situation is one of illegitimate pregnancy, and the sexual act is not described. Kleist interrupts his own narrator when he inserts the dash, just as Luke interrupts the narration of Mary's story with a gap between the annunciation and the trip to Elizabeth's home. And in both texts, the sexual act makes its mark on the women's bodies—the next time we see Mary, she is pregnant and the babe is leaping, and the text has moved forward some several months.

In both stories, as in other romantic rape texts, the text speaks loudly through a lacuna. Critics call the Kleistian dash, and in Luke's case the "gap," "the sign of an impossibility to recuperate or narrate an event," the dividing line between consciousness and understanding.⁵⁴ The textual gap foregrounds the interpretive dilemma, while simultaneously attempting to prevent a certain interpretation. The dash is the male penetration, the gap is the female hole; both substitute for the sex act. In the beginning is the gap, the formless void, one might say, not of Mary's womb, but of the text. Of course, "a hole in the text" is flooded with meaning the moment it is recognized as such. Thus the readers (including scholars such as myself), "gripped by a kind of *horror vacui*," return obsessively to the spot in the text about which the experts have told us there is really no hermeneutic doubt.⁵⁵ According to Roland Barthes, "intermittence," not explicitness, is what is erotic—the glimpse of skin between folds of material, the sexual relationship between God and Mary showing through the language of prepositional proposition.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Michel Chaouli, "Irresistible Rape: The Lure of Closure in 'The Marquise of O...'" *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 17.1 (2004) 51–81; 68, available from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale_journal_of_criticism/v017/17.1chaouli.html; accessed 2/14/2005.

⁵⁵ Chaouli, 69. Artists and theologians imagined a dove, a breath, a whisper, a breeze, in her ear, her mouth, usually trying to avoid overt sexual imagery.

⁵⁶ Chaouli, following Barthes, refers to the Kleistian dash as a *tmesis*, and uses "shut the fuck up," elided to "shut—up" as an example, 70. Reading the annunciation similarly, we can summarize linguistically the action in Luke 1:36–38 as "prediction of overshadowing and coming upon...celebrating pregnancy."

Chaouli points out that the reader's insertion of meaning into the dash in "The Marquise" mimics the rape. And the repression of the imagined sex act in Luke, represses the act itself—the attempted closure of the text and "heretical" interpretations mimics the attempted closure of the virgin body. The Lukan text opens up interpretive possibilities, and subsequent interpreters attempt to close the hole/Mary's body.⁵⁷ As readers we are led to venture—how exactly does the conception of Christ happen—yet are interpretively stifled by theological and scholarly guardians of the text.

Ultimately, Luke's story is a romance of a frightened girl, her body possessed by an omnipotent male, submissively, even servilely, consenting to the use of her body as object, receptacle, void, and then ultimately rejoicing in her objectification. But one can imagine confusion similar to that of the Marquise when the midwife confirms that she is pregnant: "now nearly swooning again, [she] drew the midwife down in front of her and laid her head against her breast, trembling violently. With a faltering voice she asked her what the ways of nature were and whether such a thing as an unwitting conception was possible. The woman smiled...and replied that with the exception of the Blessed Virgin it had never yet happened to any woman on earth."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Vernon Robbins notes, as I do above, that traditional New Testament interpretations of the annunciation "completely exclude well-known stories about virgins impregnated by gods in Mediterranean society.... The result is an absence of biblical monographs that programmatically compare the Lukan account of the conception of the virgin Mary...and accounts of the conception of virgins in Mediterranean literature.... It is highly likely that the account of Mary is multi-cultural, reconfiguring Mediterranean stories about virgins as well as Israelite stories about virgins and barren women." "Socio-rhetorical Criticism," 180.

⁵⁸ Von Kleist, 91.

THE MESOPOTAMIAN FLOOD EPIC IN THE EARLIEST TEXTS, THE BIBLE, AND THE QUR'AN

Christine Dykgraaf

Almost every culture throughout recorded history has maintained a tale of an epic flood. Several famous ancient flood narratives, such as that in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, have long been thought to have influenced the flood story related in the book of Genesis in the Bible. All of these then can be presumed to have had influence on the flood story as it is presented in the Qur'an. This paper deals with the extent this may be seen as true and to what extent the Qur'an contributes anything new to this ancient topic.

It is impossible to speak of *a* creation myth or *a* flood story because almost every culture, nation, and/or community has its own version of these crucial tales. Upon closer examination, even a single myth in a single culture might have multiple layers of narratives with elements that contradict one another. This is the case with the Biblical account of the flood, which reflects a combination of both Yahwist (J) and Priestly (P) redactor traditions. If we look farther back in time to the literature extant before the Hebrew texts, there are already in that earliest period of recorded thought numerous variations on the theme of a world-destroying deluge. Indeed the flood story "was one of the most popular tales of ancient times".¹ Upon the translation of texts such as the Assyrian and Babylonian texts about Atramhasis and the Gilgamesh epic from their cuneiform in the latter half of the nineteenth century, their similarities to the Biblical flood stories encouraged researchers to excavate further and to more precisely capture the meaning of the few legible lines remaining on damaged tablets of clay or stone. When one looks at the literature about the flood, there is a massive amount of material on what becomes the Bible's dual-perspective tale. However, little Flood narrative research discusses the Qur'an. How does it present the story of the flood? Because the Qur'an was sent down to supersede previous revelations due to their being corrupted in part by mankind,

¹ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.

it should be illuminating to investigate what in the Qur'anic tale is missing and what has been added. Lastly, does its overall motivating message differ vastly from that of the early tales or the Bible?

This chapter seeks to answer some of these questions by focusing on the text of the Qur'an. Though other extra liturgical materials might attempt to fill in the sizable gaps that exist in the Qur'anic tale, the Qur'an is supposed to be a text nearly if not entirely self-sufficient for one's edification on all basic matters of faith and action. It would have been useful if one could find a complete telling of the Flood Story, even in parts, in the major collections of hadith, such as Sahih Bukhari, but this does not exist there. Indeed, hadith mentioning Noah in Sahih Bukhari, for example, relate only three or four separate mentionings of Noah. None attempt to tell the tale. They simply mention Noah as the first of the prophets and as one of the individuals to whom people will turn on resurrection day hoping to gain intercession with God. Noah passes the people on to, by various accounts, either Abraham or Muhammad directly.² So for the purpose of this paper, The Qur'an stands alone as the Islamic window onto the exploits of Noah and his ark.

Flood Narrative Fundamentals

The flood plot is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous in the world, outstripped, perhaps only by the universality of creation tales. Almost all flood tales, that is what we can reconstruct of them, have certain elements in common. Usual components include a god or gods determined to destroy mankind, a man and his family found worthy of being spared, the building of an ark, filling the ark with animals and possessions, waters prevailing over the earth, a time adrift, the ark coming to rest—usually on a mountain, a disembarkment from the ark, and a promise or discussion with the god(s) about how the event will not be repeated. Elements in addition to these, found in fewer of the tales, include among other things explaining the reason for the flood, birds

² *Sahih Bukhari* Hadith Volume 4, Book 55, Number 556 M. Muhsin Khan Trans. University of Southern California, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/055.sbt.html>.

being sent out to test for dry land, and a sacrifice to god(s) as an initial act of thanks for being saved.³

Where reasons for the flood are given, they range from general corruption of the earth, to overpopulation, to noisy humans, to unnatural unions between humans and giants (see Table 1). But overall, the significance of flood stories revolves around the central theme of the gods' ultimate power over every atom of the universe, animate and inanimate and humanity's obligation to acknowledge this. There have historically been debates about the flood being global or local, or not having occurred at all.⁴ Many scholars throughout history have tried to find remnants of the ark or to discover conclusive geological evidence of a local or global flood. Balsinger and Sellier provide a rather complete history of the former and a *New Scientist* article by Rosie Mestel explains one of the latest geological surveys of the Black Sea area above former Mesopotamia (Iraq today) and the conclusions drawn by marine geologists Bill Ryan and Walt Pitman in favor of a local, but devastating flood.⁵ Yet, technically the same message is delivered whether the flood actually happened or is simply a very powerful and symbolic myth.

How Does the Qur'an Present the Flood?

The Qur'an has segments in which the particularly laudable aspects of prophets are enumerated. The challenges they faced fulfilling God's commands are also described in some detail, but rarely as complete uninterrupted stories. The Qur'an is a uniquely organized text where parts of stories are found scattered throughout the book. There is an assumption that the reader has an understanding of the underlying stories, largely from the Bible, that predate and inform the Qur'an. Thus, Chapter 71, Sura Nuh, does not deliver the entire flood story from start to finish. Indeed Sura Nuh does not tell the flood story at all. Instead, it focuses on Noah and his challenges versus the corrupted masses just

³ Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5–12.

⁴ See Dave Balsiger and Charles E. Sellier, Jr., *In Search of Noah's Ark: The Greatest Discovery of Our Time* (Los Angeles: Sun Classic Books, 1976), 37–50; and Ed Noort, "The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen. 6:5–9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East," in *Interpretations of the Flood*, eds. Florentino Garcia Martinez and Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3–4; and Young, *The Biblical Flood*, 25–27.

⁵ Rosie Mestel, "Noah's Flood," *New Scientist* October 4 (1997): 24, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com>.

Table 1. A comparison of flood stories

	Second Assyrian tale	First Summerian tale	Summerian tale of Berossus	Epic of Gilgamesh
Dating of the tale ?		?	275 BCE	~2500 BCE
Protagonist's name	Atrahasis (Exceedingly wise)	Ziusudra (long of life)	Xisuthros	Utnapishtim
Boat's name	none given	?	?	none
Status of protagonist	Atra and his wife become immortal	God-fearing King, becomes immortal like gods	all become immortal	Human, granted immortality
Others saved?	no	?	includes friends	yes, M/F servants
Attempt to warn others?	no, in fact may not tell others, though they help him build the boat	?	yes, he gets friends to come along as well as family and a pilot	no, flood is a secret
Reason for flood	Humanity is too noisy	?	?	To destroy sinners
Animals mentioned?	yes, animals and seeds	yes	yes	yes, and riches and servants
Storm type	roared like a bull, total darkness, screaming winds, chaotic	huge and cataclysmic, lightning and thunder	?	rain storm with chaotic wind
Birds sent out?	yes, over three days	?	?	yes
Immediate sacrifice?	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ark lands on mountain?	yes, not named	?	Mt. In Armenia	yes, on a mountain
Duration of flood	7 days and 7 nights	7 days	?	7 days and 7 nights

Bible: Priestly (P)	Bible: Yawist (J)	Qur'an: Nuh & Hud	Additional Qur'anic verses
Noah	Noah	610–632 C.E. Nuh (Noah)	
ark best human given covenant with God.	ark best human	ark Prophet, a warner	Covenant made with Noah, as with other prophets, 33:7
Noah, wife, sons, daughters-in-law and	Noah and “household”	he asks God to save him, his parents, family, and believers who come to his house, one son lost	
no	no	yes, sent as warner	many verses discuss his role as a man sent to bring people back to God
world is violent, desires covenant	all wicked thoughts, regrets	habitual sinfulness, would-be sinners need an example	9:67–70 hypocrisy, idle talk, and not accepting apostles; 25:37
a pair of each sort	yes, seven pairs, one pair unclean	pair of each sort	
rush of all waters to cover the earth from above and below	rain but not stormy here	abundant rain from the sky, also gushes forth with large waves	
no, ark on mt. Long before opening, so knew ground was struck	yes, seven days b/w tries	no	
yes	no	no	
yes, Mountains of Ararat	no	Mt. Al-Judi (Ararat)	left as a sign (54:15)
entire calendar year	68 days (incl. 7 days prep.)	not stated here	

before the flood. Whereas in the Bible, Noah spends little time trying to save the people, this is a big role for Noah in the Qur'anic tradition. Sura Nuh amounts to a recounting by God about how frustrated Noah was in trying to warn people to repent before the deluge. It is clear that Noah tried hard to get people to listen: "He [Noah] said: 'O Lord, I called my people night and day, But the more I called they only ran the farther away. And every time I called them, they thrust their fingers in their ears, and covered themselves with their garments'".⁶

When he failed "night and day" with reasoned arguments, Noah did not relent, but rather intensified his efforts. As he relates: "Then I called them loudly and more openly, And declared to them in public and in private, And I told them: 'Ask your Lord to forgive you. He is verily forgiving'".⁷ Noah specifically warns of coming rain and destruction⁸ and tempers his warnings of certain punishment with images of the beautiful, complicated world that God created for man and that he intends to terminate only because of their obstinacy.⁹ "Repent, for goodness sake!" is his mantra, but to no avail.

In verses 22 through 24 Noah actually relates that the sinners respond by waging their own campaign on behalf of paganism: 'But they did not listen to me,' Noah said, 'and followed him whose wealth and children only added to his ruin. And they contrived a plot of great magnitude, and said "Do not abandon your gods, and do not abandon Wadda or Suwa', or Yaghuth, Ya'uq or Nasr'".¹⁰ Then he admits that the plan worked because "they misled many".¹¹ At the end of Sura Nuh, Noah reaches the limits of his patience, throws his hands up in the air and requests: "O Lord, do not leave a single habitation of unbelievers on the earth. If you leave them, they will lead Your creatures astray, and beget but iniquitous and ungrateful offspring".¹² This can be read to mean that simply sinners will produce more sinners. But if one has read the Biblical material behind Noah's story, this particular verse makes one

⁶ Nuh 71.5–7. All English translations of the Qur'an used in this chapter are quoted from *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmad Ali (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁷ Ibid., 71.8–10.

⁸ Ibid., 71.11.

⁹ Ibid., 71.14–20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.22–23. These are names of pre-Islamic deities worshiped by some Arab tribes.

¹¹ Ibid., 71.24.

¹² Ibid., 71.26.

recall that part of the reasoning given in Genesis for the destruction of the world by flood, which is that “the sons of God” came to earth and wed human women who bore them giants and other beings that were not what God intended and they were all “evil continually” (Gen 6.1–5).¹³

Thus the Qur’an presents the flood by not presenting the flood. In the Qur’an one receives more of the story of Noah as a person. It is written with an attitude that if given its own voice, would say, “Boat, shmoat, what matters is that God sent someone to the humans as a means of final redemption.” When humans fail to literally “get on board”, God feels justified to destroy them and start over.

Where in the Qur’an is the tale we all know as the flood story if not in the chapter by Noah’s name? It is in parts. One larger segment falls in Chapter 11, Sura Hud, verses 25 to 49. But even here, the first 10 verses are also spent describing Noah’s attempt to save others. Verse 36 then explains that through revelation Noah is informed that there will be no more souls saved, so he can now concentrate on building the ark. Sinners scoff at him as he works and Noah replies that he will get to laugh last.¹⁴

Only at this point do we get aspects of the flood story as typically related in the Biblical and prior mythological versions. So an ark is built¹⁵ and a pair of every animal type is placed in it along with Noah’s family, but here there is a hint that there may be additional persons on the ark. Verse 40 ends with “Take into (the ark) a pair of every species, and members of your family other than those against whom the sentence has been passed already, *and those who come to believe*”.¹⁶

Interestingly, in the Qur’an’s flood story a son of Noah’s refuses passage on the ark and says he will climb a mountain and be okay.¹⁷ Of course he drowns along with the rest. The Qur’an however, does not name the son who remains among the sinners. In the Bible, all three sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) enter the ark (Gen 7.13). Muslim scholars might take one of two stances then. The first possible stance is that all three of these brothers board the ark, so the brother who fails to enter

¹³ All English translations of the Bible used in this chapter are quoted from *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, revised standard version, eds. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ Hud 11.38b.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.40 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.43.

the ark is therefore a fourth, unnamed, disbelieving son of Noah. The second stance one can take is that one of the three sons indeed had been feigning piety and at the crucial moment fails to board the ark and thus only two sons remain.

Quickly, with no mention of the storm, no screams of the dying, and no details about the duration of the flood, the waters recede in the very next verse in the Qu'ran and the ark comes to rest on Mt. Al-Judi (often translated as Mt. Ararat).¹⁸ All may disembark with God's blessing, but not without a warning that the new future is only for those who remain on "the straight path".¹⁹ There is an allusion in verse 48b that there are some who have made the trip on the ark that will be punished at some future time. It reads, "As for some [of those also on the Ark], We shall bestow advantages for a time, then send a grievous punishment on them." Thus the world is not suddenly sinless. God's being realistic. Implicit or explicit, this is also understood as being the case in the Biblical version.

Biblical exegeses of the flood discuss at some length whether God was justified in wiping out the entire human race save a handful of still flawed souls.

There is in general a strong moral element pervading the Hebrew tales. So in the flood story it is the wickedness of man which causes Yahaweh to send destruction upon him, not, as in the Babylonian tale, the mere caprice of the gods or a sort of fate which compels the gods themselves. There is a moral purpose in Yahaweh's government of the universe and His dealings with men.²⁰

In the Qur'an, the justification is in the fact that Noah had been a warner, he had tried long and hard to turn them from sin. If after such a struggle someone continued to call the prophet a liar or mock his message, God sees killing him as justified. Chapter 38, Sura Sad, verse 14 states this explicitly: "Of these [the people to whom 'Ad, Lot, and Noah preached] there was not one who did not deny the messengers. So my retribution was justified".²¹ This goes back to the idea that God has all power and the final say in all matters. If the power designated

¹⁸ Hud 11.44.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.48–49.

²⁰ John Punnett Peters, *The Religion of the Hebrews*, Handbooks on the History of Religions series (Boston and London: Ginn and Company, Publishers, 1914), 184.

²¹ Sad 38.14.

to a prophet does not save a person's soul, God then feels just in using his ultimate powers to condemn it to Hell.

That Which is Missing

As I just mentioned, there is no elaborate discussion in the Qur'an of the terror of the flood. One reads nothing of people or animals languishing in the waves or clinging to tree tops, etc. There are no details about interminable days on the ship, testing for exposed ground by sending out birds, and no discussion of sacrifice after the flood. To be fair, these are not the most essential aspects of the tale. In the Bible, these are not presented by the spartan Yahawist either. It is the Priestly redaction that provides comparatively meticulous details about the time taken up by phases of the flood, the method of sending out which types of birds in which order, and so on that make the Biblical version of the tale the most complete of all. Noah is mentioned in only three other places in the bible, and even then very fleetingly.²²

In contrast, Noah is mentioned at total of thirty times in the Qur'an. However, only suras 71 and 11 talk at length about Noah and the flood. At no point do any of these discussions of Noah ever complete the tale in a manner approximating the complex story in the Hebrew Bible. Of the remaining items about Noah (beyond these two suras), sixteen simply mention Noah in lists of other prophets when the Qur'an seeks to demonstrate the extent to which God has regularly gone to communicate with and guide his wayward people. None of these provides typical elements of the story (see Table 1).

That Which is Added

Regarding material present solely in the Qur'an and thus meant to replace or clarify earlier, manipulated texts we have already mentioned the fact that in the Qur'an a son of Noah's dies in the deluge. Because the story, fragmented as it is, is also brief there is little else appended to it.

As a consequence of the Qur'an focusing on the struggle of Noah to save people before the flood as opposed to the flood itself, it in several places stresses that Noah was not sent to persuade people by miracles.

²² Young, *The Biblical Flood*, 4.

That power resides in God alone. For example, Chapter 14, Sura Abraham, has the prophets collectively stating, "Indeed we are men like you, but God bestows His favours on whomever He wills among His creatures. It is not in our power to bring a miracle for you without the leave of God. The believers should only place their trust in God".²³

In Sura Hud, we also see that prophets must convince the people that they are not preaching for some sort of worldly or personal benefit. Noah says, "I do not demand for it [his work] any wealth from you, O my people. My reward is with God. And I will not drive those away who believe".²⁴ At least another nine mentionings of Noah stress just this unselfish motivation behind his activities. In the ancient texts the protagonists—Atrahaiss, Ziusudra, Xisuthros, Utnapishtim, and so on—are basically chosen at random among the best remaining humans. In the Bible, Noah is chosen because he and his family "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (J source) (Gen 6.8). and because he "was a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (P source).²⁵ So there is little added to the flood story in the Qur'an, and certainly very little that radically changes the movement of the action or the meaning of the myth overall.

The Overarching Messages

Each community has particular reasons for forming and preserving its flood narrative the way it does. The early tales were used in rites and rituals, provided sacred phrases, and were the stuff of priestly duties.²⁶ The tales were spoken and rewritten for over 2,000 years because

As regards the Mesopotamian myths, the tenor of the tales is one of the irreversible situations that man is at the mercy of the gods and their whims. Mesopotamians clung to their belief in a divinely appointed and essentially unchanging order.... Nor were Mesopotamians any more capable...of imagining that the world could ever be made perfect, and immutable in its perfection. Fantasies of cosmos without chaos were not for them.²⁷

²³ Abraham 14.11.

²⁴ Hud 11.29a.

²⁵ Ibid., 6.9.

²⁶ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, xvi.

²⁷ Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Nota Bene; Yale University Press, 2001), 42, 56.

Though they had at their outset religious significance, the ancient tales were also certainly material for entertainment purposes. In some cases “punning and word-play are reveled in” while “alliteration, rhetorical questions, chiasma, inclusion, similes; verb pairs with contrasting tenses; a build-up of tension through repetition with slight variation” and so on amused the attentive listeners.²⁸ The more serious “history” of the Sumerians relates the kings before the flood and after the flood, but does not depict the realities surrounding life or government as being transformed in any major way by the event. Humans were powerless, they felt, to stop the ebb and flow of kings and god-ordained disasters alike.

The Biblical flood story is perhaps most appreciated because it comes out of the darkness of such nihilism and attaches to the flood event, the confirmation of the humanity-God relationship with a covenant sealed with the mark of the rainbow. God promises never to utterly destroy the earth in such a way again (Gen 9.13–15). Here we have for the first time a happy, hopeful ending and a bond between humankind and God that exudes hope and security and that brings complete closure to the tale. In literary terms, folks, we moved beyond intermittent literary tricks and tropes and finally arrived at a plot.²⁹

The Qur’an—not really having a definitive end and hardly having a definitive beginning to its flood story—has parts of the plot, but it is sprinkled throughout the text. The Qur’an discusses the covenant in a verse quite distant from either of the largest narrative segments regarding Noah and the flood that is in Chapter 33, The Allied Troops, verse 7. Again the plot and the story are to be understood somehow from outside the text. The overarching motivation of the fractured tale of the flood in the Qur’an is to drive home the idea that evil will result in abandonment, death, separation from God and anonymity. Conversely, staying on the “straight path”, acknowledging that all comes from and is controlled by God and God alone, and submitting to the word of God through sanctioned messengers (of which the Qur’an-reciting Muhammad was the seal) will bring better days on earth perhaps, but certainly deliverance to paradise when all is said and done. So the flood story in the Qur’an is another means of delivering what is the master message of the Qur’an as a whole: submit and everything good will follow from that.

²⁸ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, xvii.

²⁹ Byron L. Sherwin, “Portrait of God as a Young Artist: The Flood Revisited,” *Judaism* 33, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 469.

CALL IT MAGIC SURGERY: POSSESSING MEMBERS,
POSSESSING TEXTS/CIRCUMCISION AND MIDRASH

William Thomas McBride

There's a bomb inside of me
Call it magic surgery in my head....
I'm cutting myself again
I'm flooding but no memories...
I must hurt myself if I remember
Try so hard to stay in control
"Cutting" (Adam Sherburne, Mark Pistel, Phillip
Steir), as recorded by Consolidated from *Business
of Punishment*, London Records, 1994

It is perhaps polemical, but nonetheless fair, to claim that the Hebrew Bible colonizes its males with the mitzvah of circumcision via its ideoplastic yoking of possession and violence, contractually marking the human generative tool as a covenant. And while Paul's "circumcision of the heart" (Romans 2:29)¹ appears to move away from the brutish foreskin violence, it does so only to smuggle in a more seductive, because invisible, possession. This monotheistic marking at first seems dialectically countered by the multitudinous perspectives and uses of the Hebrew Bible by Rabbinic Midrash which routinely undermines its host's narrative authority. Witness the libratory effects of modern midrashic reading embraced by several contemporary literary critics. My question is: Does the impact of ancient Midrashic writings somehow provide a release from monotheism's authority and power as embodied by circumcision's writing in the flesh, or do such readings ultimately reinstall that one dimensionality by reducing every reading to an inevitable endorsement of Yahweh and the children of Israel?

Yahweh's injunction to Abraham to circumcise all males eight days old and up to serve as a reminder of the everlasting covenant between God and the children of Israel, as a "token" in one's flesh, (Genesis 17:11) is a flag that stands at the beginning of one wing of western

¹ All biblical translations are from the King James Version.

literature marking the model for all future bodily writing and therefore a hermeneutics of circumcision will help discuss the nature of this grafting of writing and bodily mutilation. Yahweh demands that his contract with the children of Israel be marked on the bodies of his chosen ones. That the covenant of a monolithically patriarchal religion such as Judaism should concern itself exclusively with its male subjects is no surprise. The language of the covenant and the practice of circumcision are inherited by the Jews from their Babylonian neighbors/ancestors. Comparative study of the language of Yahweh's covenant and the Babylonian ur-text, the Code of Hammurabi, reveal formulaic language identical to contemporary suzerain contracts regarding land, offerings, and taxes.

The circumcision covenant also implies Yahweh's promissory note for the near endlessly deferred Promised Land. Published elsewhere I forge the connection between this bloody contract signed on the fore-skin, and those demanded by Mephistopheles (a contract for Faust's soul signed in blood) and Dracula (his bloody contract signed on the necks of his "followers"), as I demonstrate how Bram Stoker's novel and Todd Browning's 1931 film classic depict the Count as stereotypically Jewish.² Reflecting the Torah's ban on icons in general and for example on "hewn stone" for the altar: "for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it" (Exodus 20:25), in Leviticus Yahweh forbids all other cuttings in human flesh—save one exception found in Exodus and it is this exception which lends further insight to the nature of this deal that is "cut" between Yahweh and Israel. Exodus 21, verses 2–6 advise: "When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.... But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go free,' then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life." The doorpost is the site of course where the redemptive blood is smeared by Israel in Egypt to effect Yahweh's Passover of their first-born males. This ear-piercing ceremony visited by master upon slave mimics the power relation Yahweh shares with the children of Israel. To put it figuratively, and brutally: Like kine, like cattle from Yahweh's "Circle O Ranch", circumcised Jews wear

² William McBride, "Dracula and Mephistopheles: Shyster Vampires," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, ed. James M. Welsh, 18.2, 1990, 116–121.

God's external brand, and in doing so they claim their servitude to and ownership by the Master Rancher. And as slaves have always done, Orthodox Jews justify their own voluntary enslavement with Rabbi-inflicted, father-inflicted, self-inflicted wounds. Christian and secular circumcision is even more absurd in that the surgical practice has been "cut off" from its deeply religious signification in favor of "aesthetics" and a misplaced hygienic concern.

In *Moses and Monotheism* Freud lays out the classic psychoanalytical explanation of circumcision as jealous paternal violence displaced: "Circumcision is the symbolical substitute of castration, a punishment which the primeval father dealt his sons long ago out of the fullness of his power; and whosoever accepted this symbol showed by doing so that he was ready to submit to the father's will, although it was at the cost of a painful sacrifice."³ Derrida calls circumcision a "differential mark in language," and following Celan, he terms it a "reading wound."⁴ Meredith Kline in *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* follows Von Rad in identifying Yahweh's circumcision covenant, both rhetorically and historically, with Babylonian suzerain contracts, those indispensable "instruments of empiric administration,"⁵ the so-called "extra-biblical international vassal treaties."⁶ The anthropological consensus on male circumcision practiced by elders upon youth as compiled by Felix Bryk in *Sex and Circumcision: A Study of Phallic Worship and Mutilation in Men and Women*, is expressed best perhaps by Erhard Eylmann: "In my opinion this mutilation of the penis is a kind of token *membership* in the society of men and the pain caused by its performance serves, as many other tortures before the declaration of manhood, to make youths blind *tools* of the elders by intimidation."⁷ Richard Thurnwald writes that the institution of the rite of circumcision represents the

³ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. of *Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion* [1937] by Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967), 156.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth," trans. of "Schibboleth: Pour Paul Célan" [1986], Joshua Wilner in *Midrash and Literature*, eds. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 340.

⁵ Kline, Meredith, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 21.

⁶ Ibid., 20, see also 39, 41, 42, 86.

⁷ Eylmann, Erhard. *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Sudastralien* (Berlin, 1908), cited in Felix Bryk, *Sex and Circumcision: A Study of Phallic Worship and Mutilation in Men and Women*, trans. of *Die Beschneidung bei Mann und Weib* by David Berger (North Hollywood: Brandon, 1967), 118–119, cited by Bryk, 98, my emphasis.

first “tangible form of state formation.”⁸ Dr. Moritz Zeller interprets it as “furnishing the lad with a permanent mark of distinction” in order “to make him an obedient member of the society by means of intense bullying.”⁹ In her book *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma*, Rosemary Romberg cites letters and interviews that indicate that the American military uses circumcision to promote discipline among its recruits,¹⁰ supporting her view that circumcision is “a mark of subjugation,” as Jewish Egyptian slaves discovered.¹¹ In a spectacular moment in his autobiography, black rock and roll progenitor Chuck Berry recounts how, when still in high school, following his parents’ discovery of his sexual encounter with a student nurse in the family garage, both the nurse and his mother conspire to send him to a hospital where he is circumcised against his will, presumably to curb for a bit longer his sexual shenanigans.¹²

Circumcision marks the *pubertal* rite of passage into adulthood for the male and only in relatively few communities (mostly in the West) has its practice been pushed back to infancy, perhaps to avoid (following Freud) the sons’ retaliatory desires. Infantile circumcision also roughly coincides with the child’s entry into the symbolic order, or rather its entry into him. Suzette Heald in “The Ritual Use of Violence: Circumcision Among the Gisu of Uganda” makes reference to Pavlov’s ability to elicit successful responses to his stimuli by creating a state of trauma and anxiety which increases “the suggestibility of the participants so that they come to accept the changes.” She cites Sargant’s *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* which “argues that the induction of extreme anxiety, fatigue and forms of physical debilitation are major techniques for political and religious conversion” in order to give full weight to her observation that for the Gisu, “the only formal ‘teaching’ of the boy that occurs takes place so soon after the operation.”¹³ E. Strehlow, on the Aruanda and Loritja

⁸ Thurnwald, Richard. *Zeitschrift f. vergleich. Rechtswissenschaft*, 25, 1911, 424, cited by Bryk 147.

⁹ Moritz Zeller, *Die Knabenweihen in: Arbeiten aus dem volkerkundlichen* (Institut d. Universitaet Bern, 1923), 132ff. cited by Bryk 159.

¹⁰ Rosemary Romberg, *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma* (South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1985), 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography* (New York: Harmony, 1987), 42.

¹³ Suzette Heald, “The Ritual Use of Violence: Circumcision Among the Gisu of Uganda” in *The Anthropology of Violence*, ed. D. Riches (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 76–77.

tribes, stresses this pedagogical link: “the learning of a secret language is the conclusion of the ceremonies occasioned by circumcision.”¹⁴ To paraphrase Jacques Lacan: circumcision is the mark of the law of the father, a visible imprint of the violence of the father that reveals the juridico-contractual order of the symbolic. The infant is also immediately formatted to the anti-logic of what Gregory Bateson has taught us to call the double bind. Consider the following procedure: In order to accurately gauge where to make the incision, the penis must be first stimulated to erection. The infant’s earliest experience of genital pleasure therefore is immediately accompanied by intense genital pain. Can there be any question that such a regimen leaves its double mark, paving the way so to speak for phallic, sadistic, masochistic aggression?

The West inherits its practice of circumcision from the Jews as it does its phallic worship. The ideology of primogeniture and patriarchal power which permeates the Hebrew Bible is reflected in the obsession on the seed of life generated by the male, and so it is fitting that the male organ, the so-called wellspring of life, should be the territorialized site of this contract as an implicit reminder that Yahweh’s empiric grip claims everything. To quote the Hebrew slave: “My master, my wife, my children.” In this way God, Power, Narrative Authority, the dominant ideology, the establishment, the Society of the Spectacle, rationality, Order, call it what you will, inscribes itself from the beginning as if it has always existed and will always exist. Rabbi Derrida writes: “The wound is also universal, a differential mark in language, precisely that which dates and sets turning the ring of recurrence.”¹⁵

In the Orthodox Hebrew *brit milah* circumcising ritual, as the mohel makes his incision into the infant’s foreskin he utters the word “remember.” The notion of the word taking flesh is furthered by Brevard Childs’ *Memory and Tradition in Israel* when he analyzes the words “remembered” and “memorial” (in Esther 9.28) as having the same root, to transliterate: *zkr*.¹⁶ Childs then recounts that in the first edition of the *Thesaurus*, Gesenius

accepted an earlier interpretation that *zakhar* as the male was conceived of as the sex through which the memory of parents and ancestors was

¹⁴ Theodor George Henry Strehlow, *Die Aruanda—und Loritjastaemme*. Berlin, 1913, 11, cited by Bryk 90.

¹⁵ “Shibboleth,” 340.

¹⁶ Brevard Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel*. Studies in Biblical Theology No. 37 (London: SCM 1962), 16, 71.

propagated. In later editions of his lexicon he proposed another interpretation which then became widespread. The origin of the root lay in the idea of pricking or piercing, whence came the noun as the *membrum virile*. The idea of memory came from that of penetrating or fixing in the mind.¹⁷

The pun on “prick” as penetrating *member* and generator of genetic memory authorized by the fanciful etymology of Gesenius helps account for the circumcising of that member as a “token of the covenant” (Gen. 17.11), so as to indelibly commemorate Yahweh’s inscription “in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.” (Gen. 17.13).

Speaking of the slash that is memory for Proust, youthful scholar Samuel Beckett, whose own literary output abounds with such writerly violence, cites a passage where Marcel ponders the “double and mysterious furrow” that “had been carved” by an “inhuman and supernatural blade.”¹⁸ And the fruit which that furrow gives rise to is memory, a kind of commodified thought that shares its odd ontological status with another materialization of ideation: money. Such a connection reveals similar domesticating strategies by both Order and the money economy of the State. For Proust as for Beckett, memory is “accumulated...painfully” and “habitually enforced.” It is an “indelible...record of impressions” whose “word takes flesh.”¹⁹ Nietzsche puts it this way in the “Second Essay” from *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory.... Man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself; the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges (sacrifices of the first-born among them), the most repulsive mutilations (castration, for example), the cruelest rites....²⁰

Taking Nietzsche’s cue, Deleuze and Guattari make a more explicit scriptorial/bodily link by viewing this barbarous society as a “socius of inscription where the essential thing is to mark and be marked” through the agencies of “tattooing, excising, carving, scarifying,

¹⁷ Ibid., 9–10, n. 3.

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Proust* [1931] (New York: Riverrun Press, 1989), 28–29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19, 18.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Second Essay” in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [1887], trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale as *On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 6.

mutilating, encirculating and initiating.”²¹ They argue that man must create a “memory of words...of signs,” that this “organization, which traces its signs directly on the body, constitutes a system of cruelty, a terrible alphabet.” These signs “plant their flags in bodies. And if one wants to call this inscription in naked flesh ‘writing,’ then it must be said that...it is this cruel system of inscribed signs that renders man capable of language.”²² The concepts begin to line up: sacrifice, memory, language, possession.

The primarily “material,” external covenant of inscribing the flesh by circumcising the member of generation demanded by the Hebrew faith finds its counterpart in the scarified backs of the West’s literary characters that follow, from Shakespeare (*Titus Andronicus*) to Kafka (“In The Penal Colony”) to Beckett (*How It Is*) to Maxine Hong-Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*). A precedent for the human back as the tabula upon which the socius inscribes itself comes from Psalm 129 where the singer complains “many a time have they afflicted me from my youth...the plowers plowed upon my back: they made long furrows.” And while circumcision remains a brutally stupid, that is to say, unexamined, medical procedure promoted by a barbarous society, chosen by default by far too many North American parents, the more hidden societal practice of inscribing the dominant ideology regarding order, guilt and sacrifice, upon the minds and hearts of its citizens is certainly more insidious. This invisible ink and paper cut, which Emanuel Levinas calls an “incision made in time that does not bleed,” is bloodless because it marks the loss of what it names.”²³ Maurice Blanchot calls the result of this incision “consciousness” through which “we escape what is present, but we are delivered to representation”: this consciousness, therefore, is “our destiny,” we “cannot leave it; and in it we are never in space but in the vis-à-vis of representation”²⁴—we are delivered, as I solecize elsewhere, to a “simulacrum we can’t come back from”.²⁵ These articulated bodies are emblematic. These martyrs recreate or represent

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatari, *L’Anti-Oedipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie* [1977], trans by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane as *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minnesota University Press, 1983), 142, 144.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³ Emanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” in *Deconstruction in Context*, eds. Mark C. Taylor (The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 354.

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace Littéraire* [1955], trans. as *The Space of Literature* by Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 134, 136.

²⁵ William McBride, “Who Wants Gum? Apocalyptic Fun in Kenny’s Jelly Jungle,” in *Kenny Scharf*, ed. Barry Blinderman (Normal: University Galleries, 1998), 92.

the mutilation, the death each thing undergoes when it is *represented*, when the barbarous socius of inscription, the juridico-contractual order of the symbolic, deigns to give it a name. These martyrs, like Dionysus, Abraham, Oedipus, and the rest are mutilated in and bound to the name of Narrative Authority.

While the more or less metaphorical, spiritual, internal writing on the “fleshly tables” (Proverbs 3.3) or “foreskin of the heart” (Deuteronomy 10.16) is first found in Deuteronomy and Proverbs of the Hebrew Bible, it is seized upon by Pauline Christianity: Paul tells the Romans: “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter.” (Romans 2.28-9) It is perhaps this more “sophisticated,” Christian, figural version of circumcision—this ideal notion of bodily mutilation—which critics invoke when they speak the post-structuralist jargon of “inscription,” “articulation,” and of “writing the body.” Paul’s new circumcision is the bloodless paper cut whose invisible ink inscribes God the Father’s name on every Christian’s heart as a universal and inescapable piece of monotheistic writing. Or, can one form of writing negate another? Does countering the scarcity of Scripture with the plentitude of Midrash provide a strategy for escape?

In a graduate seminar taught in the Fall semester 2004 entitled “Monotheism, Midrash, Masochism,” my students and I spent several weeks investigating and frankly luxuriating in the high-serious play of Pharasaic-Rabbinic hermeneutics which seeks to obscure the boundaries between text and critical text, between composition and commentary, a practice across what Geoffrey Hartman has called a “continuum of intertextual supplements” or “text milieu.”²⁶ Taken as a radically anti-authoritarian and ludic hermeneutics that does not slavishly adhere to the narrative authority I traced out previously in this chapter, Rabbinic literature would seem to enter into a kind of dialectical relationship with circumcision, releasing in a way its members from the contractual yoke.

In fact much of what Jacob Neusner, preeminent ancient Midrash scholar, has to say about this remarkable literature paints a picture of a magically non-monolithic Midrashic mode. In his 500 page *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, Neusner writes: “No single, unitary, linear ‘Judaism’

²⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, “Introduction,” in *Midrash and Literature*, eds. Geoffrey Hartmann and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xi.

ever existed from the beginnings to the present, defining an 'orthodoxy'.²⁷ "As a matter of established fact, Scripture serves a diversity of purposes and therefore cannot establish a single definitive plane of meaning, the frame of reference against which all other things constitute variables. Scripture constitutes the neutral background, not the variable.... Scripture dictates nothing but endures all things."²⁸ Endorsing my notion that the Rabbis' writing wondrously splinters the unidirectional drive of Scripture, Neusner affirms: "Just as the Talmudic authors destroyed the wholeness of the Mishnah and chose to take up its bits and pieces, so the exegetical writers did the same to Scripture."²⁹ And then the surprising lynchpin phrase for my circumcision/midrash dialectic arises out of Neusner's vision: "Scripture itself forms the undifferentiated background. It is the form, not the substance; *the flesh* not the spirit."³⁰ Aha! This analogy, taken in its Pauline sense where "letter" and "flesh" often stand in for one another in opposition to "spirit," casts the entirety of Scripture as the fleshly foreskin while figuring Midrashic interpretation as the differentiating, circumcising spirit. Neusner writes: "paraphrasing the received Scriptures and Midrash, they [the commentators] *reshaped* both into a statement of their own making."³¹ Have we then an odd and unexpected reversal, a literary *lex talionis* exchange, whereby the monotheistically reshaped (circumcised) commentators multitudinously reshape (circumcise) the monotheistic text?

Neusner allows for the great dialectical movement of rabbinic thought that "moves hither and yon," but also identifies a predictable and regrettable hermeneutical telos, and in doing so reverses himself. He writes: Rabbinical dialectical thought "is always one."³² Midrash "accomplishes its goal of showing the connections between this and that, ultimately demonstrating the unity of many 'thises and that's'.³³ "The meandering course of argument comes to an end when we have shown how things cohere."³⁴ "All considerations are raised, all challenges met, all

²⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*. Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 5–6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 228, my emphasis.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 243, my emphasis.

³² *Ibid.*, 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

possibilities explored,”³⁵ *in order to annihilate them*. In evidence here is the maddening unidirectional logic of figural interpretation championed by Erich Auerbach. Neusner writes that the purpose of Rabbinic literature is to identify “the single principle behind many diverse cases.”³⁶ And “If I had to identify a single hermeneutical principle—that is a defining melody—that governs throughout, it is the quest for harmony, consensus, unity.”³⁷ Discussing Ruth Rabbah, for example, Neusner demonstrates this monological, dialectically reductive logic in its joining of such opposites as outsider and Messiah into a single feminine figure. “Through the Torah, all things become one.”³⁸ Here is the vital tactic in the campaign to show that for all of this hither and yon of hermeneutic activity, “The law is coherent in God’s mind.”³⁹ Neusner ultimately reinstalls the authority and power beautifully splintered by the Midrash machine when he reduces every reading to one monolithic endorsement of Yahweh and the children of Israel. Could the radical hermeneutical, ideological practice of midrash which resulted in a glorious and multitudinous text milieu that I had championed for all these years actually be complicit in a monological, monotheological effort to reduce Scripture to sameness, to one-ness?

Readers willing to resist the assurances (and dangers) of such hermeneutically oppressive readings will refuse Jacob Neusner’s hegemonic reduction of all of those Rabbis composing all of those richly textured readings. Monotheism’s trope of scarcity, manifested by its definition of desire by lack, and its brutal one-dimensionality regarding readings and morality must be thwarted by an anti-figural reading practice. It is a matter of faith. Neusner’s reading is indeed a spiritual act, a magical operation relying on God as Guarantor of Scripture’s ultimate meaning. As I demonstrate elsewhere, the *fait accompli* readings of Auerbach’s *figura* reveal their insufficiency when countered with Augustine’s doctrine of many meanings and his saintly acknowledgement of the polysemous (many meanings) nature of human language.⁴⁰ The one-sided figural readings provided by Neusner and endorsed by Auerbach

³⁵ Ibid., 81.

³⁶ Ibid., 88–89.

³⁷ Ibid., 89.

³⁸ Ibid., 488.

³⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰ William Thomas McBride, “*Figura Preserves: History (in) Ajar*,” in *Maps and Mirrors: Topologies of Art and Politics*, ed. Steve Martinot (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 8–15.

are achieved by rote since one is “determined to interpret in a certain way.”⁴¹ Marking all Midrashic literature in this single-minded operation yokes it to the Yahwist contract of monotheistic, monological meaning. Neusner’s pre-established interpretive schema is polemical in that it imprints its eschatological worldview on all it reads, refusing to read the Bible and its commentaries as Scripture and *as* literature.

⁴¹ Eric Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* [1959], trans. Ralph Mannheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29

THE TRAJECTORY OF HUNGER:
APPROPRIATION AND PROPHECY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH¹

Ruth Tsoffar

And God said: My children are rebellious, annihilating them is impossible, returning them to Egypt is impossible, exchanging them with another nation I cannot do, so/but what shall I do to them, behold, I shall surely torture them, and purify them through starvation. "And there was famine in the land."

– *Ruth Rabba*, Introduction

The Book of Ruth tells a story of a stranger's journey from her birthplace—the state of Moab—to her new homeland in Beth Lehem. The story is also about Ruth's transformation from a stranger, a total other, into a native. Before I proceed to my counter-mainstream reading of the story of Ruth, a short synopsis of it, as told in the Hebrew Bible is necessary.

The story moves between two geographical places: Moab, a nation that has been cursed by God beyond ten generations, and Beth Lehem in Judea, where there is famine. Naomi, her husband, Elimelekh and their two sons—Machlon and Kilyon—decide to migrate to Moab in search of food. They settle there for ten years, where the sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. The three men subsequently die, and upon hearing that there is no longer famine in Judea, Naomi decides to return to Beth Lehem, a journey of around fifty miles to the northwest. On route, Orpah, turns back, but Ruth continues on with Naomi. Once in Beth Lehem, the hungry Ruth gleanes barley from the fields of Boaz, who is Naomi's relative. Boaz and Ruth meet, and he assumes responsibility for her well being. Naomi instructs Ruth to approach him sexually, she does and they subsequently marry. Ruth becomes pregnant and gives birth to Obed, the forefather of King David.

¹ I am particularly indebted to Gil Anidjar and Jennifer Robertson for their reading and suggestions. "The Trauma of Otherness and Hunger: Ruth and Lot's Daughters," developed from this essay, and was published in *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2007).

Ruth is more than just a woman and a widow; under different circumstances one could label her a pariah. As a Moabite, she belongs to one of the most symbolically “polluted” of biblical peoples. She is constructed as a foreigner in the book of Ruth, a status that puts her outside of the purview of the legal system, where she has no national and political rights.² Of course, as an outsider to the legal system, she is not obliged to obey the law and is free to leave, free to return to Moab. But she comes instead with Naomi to Beth Lehem. In the Bible and in the mainstream interpretation of the story, Ruth is rewarded for her loyalty to Naomi; not only is she redeemed by Boaz, but she is also incorporated into Judean culture and ultimately becomes the ancestor of King David and of the future messiah. In this way Ruth enters the *comunitas* of the Hebrew people and, from her previously cursed cultural location, is assimilated into the heart of the sacred canon.

In stories of famine and hunger, when feeding finally occurs, the readers are also fed. Hunger and satiation are familiar sensations; readers identify with them, consuming and being consumed, feeding and being fed throughout the process of reading. Ideologically, such stories also serve existential allegories or didactic models. In this article, I map out the narrative dynamic of the Book of Ruth and demonstrate how its complex theological, psychological, territorial, and genealogical content makes it an ideal model of adoption and appropriation of otherness. I argue that Ruth delivers an important moral lesson about the rewards of inclusion and belonging within the literal and symbolic treatment of hunger and feeding. In this connection, I trace the evolution and affect of Ruth’s trauma of hunger and survival to the annihilation of Sodom, the departure of Lot and his family, and the etiological conception of Moab in Genesis.

My reading of hunger and satiation in the book of Ruth exposes the ideological operation of gendered (or even sexualized) foreignness and its treatment within the culture of the Bible.³ I approach the story as a

² Julia Kristeva, “By what Right Are You a Foreigner?” in *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 95–104, and see 99–101. Kristeva approaches the political jurisdiction of the foreigner through the historical distinction between two legal systems that define the foreigner: *jus soli*, based on soil, and *jus sanguinis*, based on blood.

³ In her book *Khronikah shel Predah* (A Chronicle of Separation—On Deconstruction’s Disillusioned Love), Michal Ben Naftali challenges the codes that have silenced Ruth and writes the missing intimate account of her subjectivity. Against the ideological construction of her appropriation, by focusing on the uncelebrated position of

narrative of trauma and survival in their various symbolic and allegorical manifestations, and, in the process, I unfold an already unfolded script of prophecy that transforms the breadless into the satiated, the homeless into natives, and lonely foreigners into insider protagonists of culture.

Setting a Cultural Limit through Hunger

The literary value of the book of Ruth, like that of the Bible, lies in its potential to be adapted to contemporary realities while at the same time preserving historical practices and their relevance.⁴ The numerous Midrash commentaries, sermons, and research on the Book of Ruth in the last two decades evince not only the adaptability of the narrative within a feminist, liberal context, but also its appropriation by religious leaders (including Christians) and community educators who highlight its didactic lessons of punishment and reward, love and grace (*hesed*). The book itself reflects a historically sedimented understanding of history and culture through reading and rereading. The dating of the Book of Ruth has been the subject of ongoing controversy, the gist of which is whether the book is pre- or post-exilic. Suffice to say here that the Book of Ruth (like the book of Job) is a work of historicized fiction that was most likely written during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, between 500 and 350 BCE, and set in the historical period of the Judges, some 250–450 years earlier.⁵ Several compelling reasons have been advanced for a post-exilic dating of Ruth. These include: the vocabulary and style of the narrative; the idyllic representation of the genealogy of David; and evidence of legal customs, such as the levirate marriage, gleaning

her infertile, diseased, empty, and anorectic body, Ben Naftali provides a fascinating fictional account of Ruth and her lost motherhood. Despite apparent differences, Ben Naftali's work, to which I was introduced only upon the completion of this work, takes a similar approach towards the biblical text to mine. See Michal Ben-Naftali, *Khronikah shel Predah* (A Chronicle of Separation: On Deconstruction's Disillusioned Love) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2000).

⁴ Zali Gurevitch, "The Double Site of Israel," in Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu (eds.), *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience* (New York: State University of New York, 1997), 204.

⁵ In the Bible, the book of Ruth is the second of the Five Scrolls, *Megillot*, following the Song of Songs. In the Septuagint, the book of Ruth is placed after the book of Judges, an order that has been kept in English translations ever since. As such, the book is a functional postexilic text, reconstructing the period circa 968 BCE, when it is assumed that Ruth married the Judge Ivtzan, see BT Bava Basra (91a).

in the fields, and the redemption of the land.⁶ Moreover, a post-exilic dating supports the view that the original and explicit purpose of the book was to make a case against the ban on intermarriage imposed by Ezra and Nehemaya. As an anti-miscegenist response to specific socio-political realities, the book is a fascinating document that makes apparent the internal use of history and historical narrative for political and ideological purposes.

What mobilizes the plot and guides the depiction of the characters and their resolutions in the Book of Ruth is the extreme pathological trauma which itself covers or reenacts an older trauma reactivated by the experience of hunger and famine. The radical act of inclusion and incorporation that the book teaches becomes a testimony of survival against the reality of total annihilation. What makes *this* book so different from other books is that it presents a narrative model in which hunger (be it physical, sexual, metaphysical, or epistemological) brings a woman “home,” turning the struggle of her survival into her arrival *cum* inclusion. As such, the book engages several paradigms and symbolic systems, such as geography (territory), Jewish genealogy (kinship), and naming (native language), in an attempt to transform the foreigner and/or the exiled into an indigenous local who will share the promise of the covenant with God. Ruth’s arrival in Judea builds on the connections with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and to some extent, Lot, who is discussed further on in this essay.

In the Bible, so goes the rabbinical retelling, “Ten years of famine came to the world . . . and one was in the days when the Judges ruled . . .” in the time of Naomi and Elimelekh.⁷ Hunger for food is always tied (by the rabbis) to hunger for the Torah.⁸ The Hebrew term *ra’av* means

⁶ According to the Sages, the period of Judges, starting from the death of Joshua, lasted 365 years, placing Ruth either during the period of Shamgar and Ehud, or of Debora, Barak and Yael. See Ruth Rabba (1); and the BT Baba Batra (91a).

⁷ Bereshit Rabba 25:3, Ruth Rabba 1:4; Also in Yisrael Blumental, *Agadot Rut* (Ruth in the Midrash) (Yerushalayim: Spero Publishing Co, 1947), 8.

⁸ Rabbinic commentary explains that since the time reference, *va-yehi*, is mentioned twice, two kinds of hunger are at stake: “one hunger for bread and one hunger for the Torah,” (Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 597); also Sender Mordechai Fogel, Eliyahu Yitzhak, Levi K., and Ken-Tzipor M., *Sefer Mikra’ot Temimot ‘al Rut*, The Complete Commentary Bible on Ruth (Yerushalayim: Yachdav, 1995), 3. A later Chasidic source deduces that hunger is also a spiritual phenomenon. “Famine struck the land,” means that “the soul of Judaism hungers with pangs no less severe or lethal than those of an emaciated body” (Nosson Scherman, “An Overview: Ruth and the Seeds of Mashiach,” pp. xix–lvii, in Meir Zlotowitz, *Megilat Rut: The Book of Ruth: A New Translation with*

"famine," "scarcity," and "hunger," and it always signals a condition that moves from land to mouth and from human to God. *Ra'av* ties together different institutions with different moral economies.⁹ Material scarcity was perceived in moral terms. *Ra'av*, which is also associated with a place believed to be ruled by the angel of death and its laws, further motivated Israelites to escape, in search of food and refuge from evil.

Migration in the context of hunger is often associated with theological wrongdoing, whereas permanent dwelling is an indicator of a harmonious, balanced relationship with God. *Ra'av* thus, raises questions about both its own metaphorical and historical status and the elaborate discursive mechanisms that deploy hunger in the internalized Jewish imagination. More precisely, how are hunger and its multilayered meanings and immense magnitude represented historically? Can the description of the dry and barren land elicit the entirety of the symbolic threat on survival? Can the empty granary do that? What about the empty stomach or the dry breast of the mother? Can hunger be quantified? If so, how? By the number of loaves of bread missing? The rainless days? Or perhaps, as I touch upon later, one should go back to Pharaoh's dream of his seven "emaciated and lean fleshed cows" or seven ears of wheat (Genesis 41:2–8)?

These questions are crucial in the attempt to explore the textual representation of hunger. Hunger as trauma is an all-consuming experience. It is an overwhelming crisis that tightens the connections of the human body to nature, the land to moral commitment, and local traditions to a wider geography. Hunger compels one to challenge old attachments and relationships as it sets limits on one's knowledge and understanding of reality and life. To be traumatized is to be possessed by the image of an event, such as hunger.¹⁰ Contextualizing hunger, or any type of trauma for that matter, is crucial, as it helps one, in the words of Felman and Laub in their work on Holocaust testimony, "gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text."¹¹ The matter of contextualizing trauma in a wider cultural perspective

a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1994), xx.

⁹ In English too, "hunger" refers to the desire, need, physical sensation, or craving for food while "famine" emphasizes extreme scarcity or a shortage of food.

¹⁰ Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4–5.

¹¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, "Foreword," in *Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xv.

cannot be emphasized enough for, as they explain, “the empirical context needs not just to be known, but to be read: to be read in conjunction with, and as part of, the reading of the text.”¹² Their point is pushed further by Cathy Caruth, in her work on trauma and memory; namely, that the “truth,” of a traumatic event like hunger, forms the center of its (hunger’s) pathology. In other words, at the core of this pathology is truth as it was remembered and not as it was experienced. Caruth’s emphasis here is on the persistent reoccurrence of traumatic memory in its literal manifestation.¹³

Mapping Geographies and Genealogies

In the Book of Ruth, the trauma of hunger animates two important maps: a geographical map and a genealogical map of biblical figures and ancestors. The geographical map traces their journey to Moab, and then, ten years later, back to Beth Lehem. The book highlights their movement out of Judea and across national and ethnic boundaries. Dynamic geography and genealogy are thus intertwined, rendering the text dialogical while historically situating the narrative.

The genealogical map illustrates the connections among the patriarchal lineages of the tribe of Yehudah, the family of Elimelekh, the people of Moab, and five generations later, King David.¹⁴ Women too are incorporated into these lineages. The genealogical ties shared by women and men provide an *Ür*-template that links past, present and future generations. In fact, one can count at least ten generations from Boaz back to Yehuda and Peretz (in Genesis), and from Ruth back to Lot. One can also count forwards to David, and even to Goliath in the book of Kings, who, according to the Rabbis, was the descendent of Orpah. The genealogical map is part of the larger project originating in Genesis, to write *Sefer Toldot Ha-‘Adam*, The book of generations of man (Genesis 5:1), namely the construction of the house of Israel.

Moving across geographical or familial boundaries is often an act of choice that underscores one’s freedom to invent new alternatives. However, movement impelled by hunger is dictated by urgency.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Caruth, 4–5.

¹⁴ Another kind of dialogue or intertext in the book of Ruth is created through allusions to other biblical figures such as Rachel and Leah (Ruth 4:11).

Migration for the sake of survival is motivated by the quest for food, land, or—as in the case of Ruth—a husband. It often entails the crossing of borders, an intensified confrontation with ambivalence, and the reconciliation of identities. More significantly, hunger forces possible transgressions of taboos such as forbidden foods and proscribed marriage partners. As a symptom, hunger also marks the boundaries of the body, disrupting categories of identity, knowledge and order. The question, then, is how does the trauma of hunger become transformed into a narrative of belonging and nativity?

In her book, *The Curse of Cain*, Regina Schwartz approaches the subject of difference in biblical and sacred narratives by focusing on the construction of the Other, arguing that, “[a]cts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence.”¹⁵ Here violence involves not only violent acts like war or rape but the very conceptualization and articulation of the Other. Markers of difference are hierarchical. Exclusion hurts. Within the contemporary Israeli mindset of “us” and “them,” Moab of ancient Judaism can hardly be understood as a tragedy of representation and violence. From its early conception, and throughout the Bible, the nation of Moab is positioned along with the Amalekites and Philistines as the ultimate absolute enemies. Located along the northeastern part of the Dead Sea, in what later became the Moabite Desert, Moab entered into the Israelites’ discourse of hunger as they wandered through the desert. There, God imposed the Moabites’ exclusionary status beyond ten generations because “they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt” (Deut. 23:4–7). This tense encounter around food and feeding positioned Moab as the ultimate other in the collective memory of Israel. The book of Ruth, in part, struggles with the undiminished potency of this memory, locating Ruth within national boundaries while at the same time expanding the limits of tolerance of her otherness.

Moab is at the most extreme end of the Israeli exclusionary system and represents a “category of ‘unbelonging.’”¹⁶ To the extent that Israeli culture has developed a discourse of belonging and a constitution based on shared terms of inclusion—whether institutional, disciplinary, national, regional, cultural, sexual or racial—it has also developed

¹⁵ Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁶ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

a discourse of *unbelonging*. No mere articulation of exclusion, this is a discourse involving an “active form of ‘unbelonging’ against which the anxiety-laden work of collectivities and mutualities and shared values and histories and rights” defines difference and other epistemological constructs.¹⁷ Systems of meaning that are disrupted as difference and otherness introduce a new ontology.¹⁸ Foreignness challenges tolerance and defines the parameters of inclusion and exclusion; it becomes the border of culture, its limits, and its symptoms.

As early as the first verses of the Book of Ruth (Ruth 1:2), readers are introduced to Machlon and Kilyon, Naomi’s sons, whose very names refer to their short life spans.¹⁹ The name “Machlon” derives from either or both *halah*, sick, or *machah*, to wipe. The name “Kilyon,” derives from the root *kalah*, “to annihilate, or to consume,” exposing the inherent connection of the verb to the noun (*kol*) which means all, whole, each and every. And it is exactly along the dialectical path of this wide spectrum of meanings between *kalah* and *kol*, or between the inherent totality of the act of annihilation and its sweeping breadth, that Ruth and Naomi move. This totality is the sum of their dialectical experience of death, destruction and hunger, and life, restoration and satiation. For Ruth, it is knowledge of wheat and love that encapsulates the entirety of her sensual and intellectual experience. It is a knowledge that will culminate in her magical satiation (*va-tisba’*) and in her motherhood. For Naomi, it is embodied knowledge of the extremes of life and death and the possibility of change that she learns to see in these extremes.

If one reads carefully the words of Naomi while on the road back to Beth Lehem, one can fathom Naomi’s initial unequivocal certainty that change—from hunger to satiation, from empty to full, from barren to fertile—is not only impossible but beyond comprehension. As Naomi puts it, even if it were possible for her to conceive a son, she could never conceive a husband either for Ruth or Orpah. Naomi does not mince any words in telling Ruth that in returning to Beth Lehem together, their shared genealogical destiny is sealed. In other words, Naomi, knowing the extent of Ruth’s historical, pathological hunger

¹⁷ Rogoff, 5.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Reading the Bible,” pp. 115–126, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 119.

¹⁹ See Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988).

and genealogical trauma, frames the conditions of Ruth's belonging in stark, realistic terms.²⁰

In the same way, Ruth's speech act—her response to Naomi's insistence that she return to Moab, her home—must be heard from within the particular context of her peoples' crisis, trauma, and survival. As a testimony of her history, it must be heard with a sensitized acuity to a discourse that is unable to be represented; yet, nevertheless is written.²¹ Personal narratives, such as the following, exchanged between Naomi and Ruth, compel the reader to engage with and to participate in the unfolding events, and to consider the possibility that their words, perceived as a testimony, can facilitate an understanding of trauma, its impact, and the human responses to it. The profound and prophetic force of Ruth's words reverberates with the crisis of hunger and famine, the experience of death, the collapse of identity (both Moabite and Judean), and the total threat to history itself.

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house; God deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

9 God grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.
10 And they said unto her: 'Surely, we will return with you to your people.'

11 And Naomi said: 'Return, my daughters; why will you go with me? *Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husband?*'

12 Return, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say: I have hope, should I even have an husband to-night, and also bear sons;

13 would you wait for them until they were grown? Would you, then, refrain, from marrying? No, my daughters; it has been far more bitter for it for your sakes, for the hand of God has turned against me.'

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth clung (*davkah*) to her.

15 And she said: 'Behold, your sister-in-law is gone back to her people, and to her god; return after your sister-in-law.'

16 And Ruth said: 'Do not entreat me to leave you, and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God;

²⁰ In admonishing Ruth and Orpah to return to their people, Naomi further acknowledges their foreignness, and in articulating her concern for them, she marks their ethnic difference as a critical factor defining their problematic chances of belonging.

²¹ Caruth, 10–11.

17 where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; God will do so to me, and thus shall he add, for only death will tear us apart.'

18 And when she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was absolutely determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her.²² (my italics)

Orpah returns to Moab. Ruth insists on remaining with Naomi; and it is in this singular moment that Ruth resolutely (re)asserts her assimilatory belonging in a totality that crosses national, religious, and territorial boundaries. Her invocation of God seals her speech act, transforming her words into a contract, an unbreakable vow of her identification with Naomi and of her new identity conceived within her commitment to change. Ruth's contract of identity becomes her claim of inclusion, a virtual passport into the affective core of a culture from which she would keep at bay.

But there is a second crucial moment in the narrative that contributes immensely to Ruth's representation as worthy of getting even closer to the core of her assimilating culture, eventually turning her into the mother of David and the ancestor of the Messiah. It has to do with her ability to curb her historical, traumatic hunger. One of the lessons in the Book of Ruth is that the cursed nation of Moab cannot provide a solution to hunger. In contrast, the bountiful fields of Boaz in Beth Lehem provide the most fulfilling relief from hunger. Before the hungry, breadless Ruth in the field of Boaz is identified as *Ruth*, she is called "the young Moabite woman." The exchange between Boaz and Ruth is revealing, not only does he immediately assume the role of her protector, but he blesses her in God's name, thereby confirming another level of her inclusion: "*Yeshalem YHWH po'alekh, u-tehi maskurtech shlemah*," (May God recompense thy work, and be thy reward complete) (Ruth 2:12). Boaz then rewards Ruth with roasted grains, an act which, as I will show, not only responds to her historical and traumatic hunger, but also marks a crucial shift in the story of her emerging subjectivity and nativeness. A demonstration how this shift occurs linguistically follows.

Boaz uses three words in his blessing—*yeshalem*, *maskurtech*, and *shlemah*—all of which signify a full reward, payment, or compensation. The root *shalem* signifies perfect, full, complete, and whole; in its *pi'el* verbal form it means to pay back, to compensate, and to remunerate. Boaz's blessing, therefore, triply emphasizes Ruth's worthiness for her

²² The translation is based on the Jewish Publication Society with my modifications.

reward. The triplicate structure of his utterance will soon be repeated in another configuration. Ruth, sitting “beside the harvesters,” eats Boaz’ gift of roasted grains, as recounted in chapter two of the story: “*Va-tokhal, va-tisba’ va-totar.*” (And she ate, and she had her fill, and she had leftovers) (*Ruth* 2:14).²³ In Hebrew, these three consecutive verbs impart a picture of incredible existential balance. Symbolically, Ruth’s new experience of satiation sets a limit on the all-consuming trauma of historical hunger. Recognizing the singularly potent economy of this passage, the Rabbis elaborated on the meaning of Boaz’ gift of grains or bread, referring to it as *lechem malkhut*, or the bread of kingship, a royal bread, the emblem of the future Davidic kingdom. In another teleological commentary, these three consecutive verbs are deployed as grandiose models of and for Jewish history: a) *va-tokhal*, she ate the bread of the kingdom that would emerge from her in the days of David; b) *va-tisba’*, she had her fill in the days of Solomon; and c) *va-totar*, she had leftovers in the days of Hezekeyah. Another commentary posits an even more monumental scale of Jewish time that occurs first in the days of this world, then in the days of the Messiah, and finally, in the days of the world to come (*Ruth Rabba* 2:14).

According to the Midrash, “Boaz gave her just a ‘pinch of parched [roasted] grain between his two fingers’, and Ruth’s stomach was blessed, for she was satisfied by such a small morsel and even had some left over.”²⁴ The Rabbis concluded that, “it seems like there was a blessing in the intestines [gut] of that virtuous woman.”²⁵ Her portrayal as a completely satisfied woman corresponds with another rabbinical interpretation of the name Ruth, as the “saturated” or “satiated one.”²⁶ However perceptive the Rabbis were in recognizing the critical significance of Ruth’s satiation, they nevertheless overlooked its connection to her history of hunger, which I find crucial to understanding the shift in her status and subjectivity, from breadless to well fed and from marginal other to insider. Against a backdrop of the traumatic collapse of boundaries imposed by widowhood and hunger, the narrative aims

²³ Ben Naftali builds on the centrality of this expression in the general depiction of Ruth, the allegory of deconstruction (as theory and practice of female, by female). See her section “*Va-tokhal, va-tisba’ va-totar*,” in Ben Naftali, 132–201.

²⁴ Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman, *The Book of Ruth, a New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah Publication, 1994[1976]), 99.

²⁵ *Ruth Rabba* 2:14. Also see Fogel et al., 30.

²⁶ *Berakhot* 7b. Also Kristeva, 1991, 71.

to restore *the* perfect moment: the totality encapsulated by *shlemah* and the triplicate repetition of her reward and subsequent satiation. It is precisely the overdetermined nature of her compensation that underscores the extent of her symbolic hunger and desire for inclusion.

Boaz' gift of roasted grains enables Ruth to return to her mother-in-law, Naomi, not as the impoverished gleaner who shares her grains, but as a satiated provider of bread. From a psychological perspective, it can be argued that Ruth is thereby transformed into a "mother" who can begin to heal the symbolic wound in both Naomi's family, and Moab. The verb, "eating her fill," *va-tisba'*, introduces the possibility of actually healing or closing this wound, which in turn, allows for the opening of new discursive spaces where the experiences of the foreigner (Ruth) in a new geography and genealogical history can be inscribed.²⁷ This transition from closing to opening signifies the new modality of Ruth's identification with Boaz, and his grains, and Naomi. At the same time, the balance (or leftovers) of her reward of grain becomes a gift that she takes to Naomi, thereby resolving allegorically, the harsh judgment inflicted upon Moab and introducing the possibility of inter-cultural hospitality.

Surviving Total Annihilation

Thus far, I have been discussing the symbolic wound and the traumatic historical hunger in the Book of Ruth. I shall now move from text to context, and tie the Book of Ruth to the story of Lot in Genesis, which I believe should be read as a preface to Ruth. Several scholars have alluded to the internal connection between the story of Lot and the Book of Ruth, focusing primarily on the veiled (hetero)sexual act of procreation. My contribution will be to frame both stories within a context of psychological ethnic trauma and its ramifications.

The story of Lot functions as a preface to the Book of Ruth, not simply because Ruth is a descendent of the incestuous Moabites—a fact that defines her otherness, but because she embodies her people's col-

²⁷ The Semitic verb *sava'* implies not only eating one's fill, but also the ultimate sense of satisfaction and contentment, as in metaphorical expressions such as *sva'* *'ayin* (lit., "one with a satiated eye" or visually content) or *sva'* *ratzon* (lit., "one with a satiated desire" or emotionally mentally content). In the Bible, Abraham died satiated, at a ripe old age (*zaken ve-savea'*) (Genesis 25:8).

lective memory. The origin of Moab is based on the assumption of the total destruction of the world. Unfolding in a mountain cave of Zo'ar, the story of Lot also helps us fathom the depth of the pathology that motivates Naomi and her family to locate from one place to another. It provides the etiological framework that informs Moabite and Amonite identity. These nations emerged from an ultimate threat to humankind which was fully internalized by Lot's daughters; namely, the fear of apocalyptic *kilayon*, or annihilation. This story can be understood as a radical cosmogony in which Lot and his family are rescued from the city of Sodom. God has resolved to destroy Sodom and its sinning inhabitants and instructs Lot to flee. In the sequence that follows the city's destruction, Lot's daughters ply him with drink and, once he is fast asleep, proceed to have sex with him; although unconscious, Lot is nevertheless implicated in this incestuous act of impregnation.²⁸

Indirectly, the story of Lot addresses the subject of collective punishment by articulating the moral justification for God's vindictive decision. Earlier, in Genesis 18, Abraham challenges the totality of God's collective punishment against all the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 18 introduces the grand-scale, all-encompassing plan of the destruction through Abraham's notorious dispute with God. If God is proving that as part of the covenant, he does not "cover anything from Abraham," (Genesis 18:17) then the divine's motives for moral punishment are transparent, accessible and comprehensible to humans. For Abraham they are. He seeks to rescue the few innocents (*tsadikim*) who might be in the city, thereby challenging God's totalizing decree and uncompromising action. Lot, Abraham's nephew, is singled out, emerging as the only possible survivor of the approaching destruction. As his name, from *malat* (escape), indicates, Lot is God's only concession to Abraham.

The Bible gives a relatively detailed description of the physical, as well as psychological difficulty of letting go of the past. Lot's departure from the destroyed city was exceptionally difficult. He lingers (*va-yitmahmehah*), and his guests, the angels, themselves have to urge him to leave—they literally take Lot's hand, and the hands of his wife and daughters, leading them out of the city and toward the mountain.

²⁸ See also Kristeva, 1991, 74–75. Recently, other feminists have addressed this connection: Tikva Frymer-Kensky, for example, introduces a more tolerant view of the incest. See *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 258–263.

But afraid it will be too far of a journey, Lot goes only as far as the nearby town of Zo'ar. He expresses his fear, a fear that either reflects his shrinking faith in God or causes him to doubt God's word.

And Lot said unto them: 'Oh, not so, my lord; behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shown unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest the evil overtake me, and I die. Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one; oh, let me escape thither—is it not a little one?—and my soul shall live.' (Genesis 19:18–20).

The family's narrow escape culminates with the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt. Now, the overwhelming drama of destruction and escape—enhanced by ear-shattering blasts and the smell of burning sulfur—is amplified by the prohibition on looking back, not only at the city, but also at the wife/mother left behind. Lot is frightened and slow to move.²⁹ Once in Zo'ar, The fearful Lot presumes that even Zo'ar is dangerous, and so he makes his way to the mountains and finds refuge in a cave. "And Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; *for he feared to dwell in Zoar*; and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters" (Genesis 19:30, emphasis is mine). Does his hesitation and contradictions reveal just lack of trust in God, or, is it typical of human behavior in moments of extreme terror? Throughout this panicky episode, the destructive God appears all fire and brimstones overthrowing "those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground" (Genesis 19:25).

In this very moment of Lot's indecision, his daughters emerge as the agents of history, and metamorphose from daughters into mothers. This moment marks a pivotal transformation of the two women. Earlier, while residing in Sodom, Lot had offered his daughters to the rowdy men milling outside his door—"both old and young all the people from every quarter" (Genesis 19:4)—in exchange for the male angels whom they were eager to sodomize. With the application of what Derrida calls, "Sodomy and sexual difference," Lot, himself a foreigner (*ger*), employs 'the law of hospitality,' which occasions a tense negotiation

²⁹ Whereas Lot was slow to rise and greet the angels, Abraham *ran* to welcome them (cf. Genesis 18:1–2 and 19:1–2).

based on a hierarchy of guests and hostages.³⁰ By offering his two virgin daughters, in part to prevent the commission of homosexual acts, Lot sets into motion the process culminating in the total collapse of his parental role and agency.³¹ Moreover, the departure of Lot and his daughters from the city precipitates a crisis during which the mother is eliminated, figuratively shifting the subject of survival from the individual or familial realm to the realm of humankind. This shift in turn, forces another crisis: that of incest between Lot and his daughters. Rationalizing that, “[o]ur father is old, and there is not a man on the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth,” (Genesis 19:31) the daughters use Lot as a means to inseminate themselves on successive nights.

The daughters interpret their reality according to the psychological impact and magnitude of their trauma. They perceive the destruction as far more extensive in scope than just the city. Even the rabbis were sympathetic to their sex act, decreeing that the daughters did not know that only Sodom was destroyed and that, therefore, they did not sin.³² Their incestuous act was not motivated by libidinal desire but by an altruistic urge to rescue humankind. Nevertheless, I would argue that incest, as a form of violence, is as much a crisis in itself as it is a remedy for their perceived crisis.³³ (I am using “crisis” in the sense employed by Caruth, following Freud, to mean the inherent void of knowledge, and the collapse of understanding.³⁴) Their reproductive albeit incestuous act attests to the daughters’ anxiety of the trauma and experience of total destruction, including the disappearance of both their mother and all

³⁰ According to Jacques Derrida, the tradition and practice of hospitality helps to explain ethical and political situations whereby the stranger or foreigner encounters “the limits of power, norms, rights and duties” in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

³¹ In Pamela Levi’s painting, “Lot and His Daughters” (1994), a faceless Lot is pictured lying stark naked on a bed in a room that replaces the cave in the Bible. According to Orly Lubin, male nudity signifies the anonymous pornographic gaze, and thus in the painting, highlights Levi’s subversive attempt to unframe and fragment the biblical narrative. Orly Lubin. *Ishah Koret Ishah* (Women Reading Women) (Zmorah, Bitan & Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2003), 262–275. See also Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

³² Psikta Rabbati [Ish Shalom] 42:5, in Lubin, 309.

³³ A different approach was introduced by the Sages who rationalized the incestuous act as Lot’s punishment for offering his daughters to the lascivious men of Sodom (Midrash Tanhuma, *Vayira* 12).

³⁴ See Caruth, 3–12.

males on the planet. They employ a deductive interpretation of their history. The cave in which they find refuge and where they commit their incestuous act, symbolizes, in Freudian terms, female genitalia; it is a compromised setting for fear and hope. The mountain cave is isolated enough to give rise to the daughters' sense of total annihilation which justifies their desperate act of survival. Lot goes on to become another patriarchal figure in Genesis; but, unlike his "perfect" uncle, Abraham, he is positioned outside of the covenant and becomes the father of Moab.

Reading the story of Lot helps us realize that the solution to a given crisis generates another crisis in its wake. Resolutions are preceded and succeeded by resolutions. Felman and Laub have argued that the representation of trauma is problematic because it is unrepresentable. However, I argue that one of the problems associated with trauma is that it is often veiled, unrecognized as such, especially if it is an other's trauma, and therefore a crisis never fully acknowledged in the first place. The actions of Biblical subjects in a state of crisis, therefore, are constrained; they are given little legitimacy to reveal a wider range of human behaviors and are instead represented as encoded fragments. Rather than being perceived of as a symptom of pathology, a given crisis becomes the very essence or main aspect of representation. If such a crisis is the founding moment of certain realities—an ordeal, a test, a proof, a lesson—it is soon identified as the main aspect of identity.

Even if Lot and his daughters successfully escape to Zo'ar, the psychological impact of the trauma of experiencing the disintegration of the world as they know it obliterates whatever sense they may have entertained about the future. With the disappearance of the mother (Lot's wife) from the historical record of Moab, and within the context of their "crisis consciousness," the daughters' economic imperative is to "preserve the seed (*zera*)" of the father (Genesis 19:33, 35), for the biological father is perceived by them as the only living provider of semen. Anticipating total destruction, they must, as survivors, "document" with their bodies the absence of their mother and the erasure of their past. Not only do they embody God's punishment of Sodom, the daughters serve as living testimony of the historical trauma of that sinful society. Moreover, their embodied testimony legitimizes Lot as the father of a nation—despite the incestuous nature of his paternity—in Genesis' overall scheme of nations and ethnicities emerging out of individuals and their kinship relations. But, if the Bible accentuates the narrative's terms of survival as the basis for Lot's moral and ethical setback—blurring the

distinction between the crisis itself and its resolution, it also legitimizes his incestuous act. Also made explicitly clear is that Lot's indecisiveness when faced with a crisis allowing few compromises and no ambiguities, situates him as among the "unchosen." Thus, in a narrative about "the chosen people," Lot is greatly reduced in stature.³⁵

The story of Lot brackets patriarchy and emphasizes women's traumatic subjectivity. Hunger, per se, is not explicitly the central issue. Rather, it is a sense of scarcity (and scarcity of semen) that dominates the gist of the narrative, which is about the flight toward safety and survival. To a large extent, the story of Lot presupposes Ruth's inability to refuse the power of ideological determination and its totalizing authority; her story too is introduced within the uncompromising threat of complete annihilation. I wish to emphasize that what is shared between these two biblical narratives is not only the sexual act or the Moabite origin of the protagonists as others have claimed, but also the underlying etiological pattern of identity formation. Moab emerges from within the total ruinations of humankind, and ten generations later, now represented by Ruth, is still a land facing dire threats to life and reproduction.

Conclusion: Appropriating Hunger

The variety of resources available to the Moabite women used to set the boundaries of national identity, wherein meaning is inscribed in each grain of barley, and in each (male) seed, soliciting and securing their loyalty and commitment. A long, continuous, ideological lineage describes the existential contours of belonging in the Bible and the process of identification with the bounded nation and its imagined community.

The Book of Ruth proceeds from actual acts of feeding to a didactic story about feeding hunger for the experience of nativeness. In this way, the phenomenon of hunger expands its own boundaries from the personal body to encompass the textual one. Rather than simply motivate the narrative plot, the trope of the ever-hungry mouth provides a historically grounded framework for, ironically, reading Ruth as a meta narrative for appropriation. The degree to which Ruth adamantly

³⁵ The Midrash contends that Lot's daughters did not accept the yoke of the Law, the Torah (*Sefer Ha-aggadah, Matan Torah* 59).

insists on being included geographically, territorially, religiously, and nationally is directly proportionate to her reward of nativeness: she not only gives birth to Obed, but most significantly, she is the foremother of David and the Messiah. Her—the Jewish—story of return is a story of redemption, a form of arrival.

The density of the entire narrative, no different from the totality of one grain or one seed, motivates poetic solutions to crises in the same way that Beth Lehem, the House of Bread, transforms a literal granary into an ideological metaphor of the loving or benevolent body and its reproduction. More in the Book of Ruth than elsewhere in the Bible, a grain of wheat is a seed of prophecy in the stories told of land and nation. After all, as the women of Judea remind Naomi, Ruth is “better than seven sons” (Ruth 4:16).

PART IV

SUBJECTIVITY

INTRODUCTION TO PART IV

Ngwarsungu Chiwengo

The parable of Jonah's resistance to God's mission and his desire to assert his will in determining how God metes out justice against those who have sinned is a great example of man's affirmation of his selfhood, his interpretation of the world around him, and understanding of God's nature and power. While it is, foremost, a tale of God's compassion and might, it is a narrative of human subjectivity and subjective needs. In acknowledging to the sailors in his company his responsibility for the storm that is about to wreck their lives, Jonah declines his ethnic and religious identities as a Hebrew and a worshiper of the Lord. After numerous trials and tribulations, in the belly of the whale, it is with the first-person subject "I," immediate and noninferential, that he relates his experience in the raging sea and acknowledges God's ultimate power and compassionate nature. Despite the centrality of Jonah's subjectivity, the ultimate moral of this parable and Jonah's prayer is man's submission to the will of a compassionate God who in the end is knower of our fate and destiny, for, as Jonah acknowledges, "[s]alvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2.12). Yet, this submission is possible solely when man understands God's nature through his own human experience and subject perspective. Indeed, to understand God's compassion for Nineveh, Jonah had to experience concern for a vine.

It is this parable, reflecting my personal resistance to respond to a call to travel, that my mother used to convince me of the necessity to immigrate to America at a time when I feared growth and yearned for the stability of home, the Democratic Republic of Congo. As an individual who had already experienced life at the periphery during my graduate studies, I understood all too well the marginality and alienation of the immigrant. Yet, according to my mother, I, like Jonah, had to submit to the will of God in accomplishing my existential mission and seeing what lay behind the doors. This biblical excerpt, delineating my personal dilemma and articulating my existential angst, informed my decision to journey to America, and it is only one example, among many other biblical narratives, that shapes and informs our perception of reality and our actions. Biblical narratives reflect our self-questionings about

our human condition and essence. They delineate the introspection, inner struggles and desires of biblical characters and, thus, invite us to reflect on our essence and the world around us; they invite us to ask fundamental questions about our human nature and the meaning of our existence. The Bible empowers us to decipher our daily interactions with others and to ponder on our choices and actions. Consequently, it is in the biblical words of Isaiah that a Methodist minister found, during the Democratic Republic of Congo Kasai/Katanga ethnic conflict of 1991–1992, an explanation for ethnic exclusion during Katanga's quest for social and political liberation. During the Mobutu era, it is the message of the American evangelist Pat Robertson and the Christ-like bleeding hands of a European that were used to contain the population; God, they were told, did not want and would not allow bloodshed in the Congo, despite the ensuing current results. It is also the Bible, as Peter Abrahams illustrates in *Wild Conquest*, which sustained apartheid and informed the ideology of the Afrikaners as chosen people.¹ And was it not Romans 13:1–7 that was utilized, according to Grant Le Marquand, to dissuade anti-apartheid supporters from opposing the “Christian” government?² Do not scriptures, randomly chosen during biblical divination sessions, determine the actions and future of individuals in need of guidance in their decision-making? And when we seek peace, justice, or truth, do we not resort to the Bible, the icon that upholds these values?

Jacques Lacan aptly contends that subjectivity is inscribed in language, so subjectivity is no where best represented than in literature—representing slices of life—since it delineates agent characters aware of themselves and trying to make sense of and acting on their worlds.³ This knowing agent, central in literature, is a subject that makes history. Figurative readings of the Tanakh, hence, disclose what is human as Roberta Sabbath demonstrates in “Sacred Tropes: The Laugh of Abraham and the Birth of Subjectivity” through her study of literary tropes. According to her, humanness—character exteriorizations and human emotions and cognition—is discursively constituted through the

¹ *Wild Conquest* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

² Grant Le Marquand, “New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa,” in Gerald O. West and Muse W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 82–83.

³ Paula Murphy, “The Linguistic Dit-Mension of Subjectivity,” *Minerva* Vol. 8 (2004). <http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol8/dit-mension.html>. “The Mirror Stage in the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 178–183.

metonymic narrative of the Tanakh, which separates divine and supernatural experiences from the human; Katherine Lundeen's "The Book of Job and Shakespearean Subjectivity," likewise, shows biblical influences within Shakespeare's drama. Most importantly she demonstrates how the Book of Job is the palimpsest of Shakespeare's dramatization of subjectivity; and J. Jobling and A. Roughly's "The Right to Write: Power, Irony, and Identity in the Book of Esther"—focusing on the power of intertextual structures, seminal in the formation of identity and power—reveals the fluidity of both identity and power and the entrapment of female identity within the textual male/female dualism. Biblical narratives provide examples of characters that are objectified through the gaze of others, yet become subjects and agents and shift from dependency and voicelessness to speaking subjects. Biblical texts enable us to understand how identities are inscribed in narratives, how the latter define the subjectivity of characters, and how texts, in turn, are liberational and repositories of values and morality as evinced in Robert Paul Seesengood and Jennifer K. Koosed essay "Crossing Outlaws": The Life and Times of Jesse James and Jesus of Nazareth."

Yet, this thinking and speaking subject, according to Paul Rodeway, "is a *knowing agent*, an entity aware of itself and of a wider world. [...] Second, this subject is in part defined by that world, [...]. The identity of the subject is grounded in specific histories (social histories, personal biographies) and located in specific places, (corporeal and environmental)."⁴ The subject, according to him, is also "contextualized and developing through time and space" and "the notion of the subject suggests the *exercise of power* and the subjection to such power." It, he writes, "may exercise power over other subjects or the object world or be the sufferer of the exercise of power by others."⁵ Because the subject is culturally and spatially anchored, Abrahamic tradition sacred texts are comprehended in accordance with the different spatial positions of its readers. V.Y. Mudimbe's "Philosophy and Theology in Political Practices," surveying the various ideological positions of Central African theologians and philosophers, eloquently expounds on the historical necessity for Christianity to adapt to various cultures because, as he claims, it "has thus been culturally marked by its integration into various

⁴ Paul Rodaway, "Exploring the Subject in Hyper-Reality," in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (eds.), *Mapping the Subject* (Routledge: London and New York, 1995), 249.

⁵ Ibid., 249.

European cultures, and those Christian customs and feasts which are genealogically linked to immemorial pagan traditions bear witness to this fact.”⁶ All sacred texts are anchored in their historical and cultural worlds, yet sacred texts have been disseminated all over the world and the Christian Bible⁷ most prominently because vernacular translations have given these texts some cultural autonomy.⁸ Because theological comments are culturally contextual as shown in *The Bible in Africa* and Muse E. Dube’s *Other Ways of Reading*,⁹ the interpretations or the construction of meaning of these texts are informed by cultural differences and differentiation of consciousness. Gottfried Hagen’s “From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth: Popular Stories in Islam” illustrates the complexities of disseminating sacred texts in his examination of popular stories of the prophets of Islam and how the latter, limited in numbers within the Koran, acquire a more significant role during its expansion as the Koran loses its cultural consensus and develops new patterns of thought.

The dispersion of sacred texts—the Tanakh and the New Testament in particular—is generally associated with imperialism. Missionaries, as V.Y. Mudimbe contends, were accomplices of European imperialist powers and contributed much to the colonial enterprise, for to partake in this Christian community, non-Western subjectivities and cultural orders were refashioned in accordance with Western concepts of identity, economics, and cultural norms. Even though the Bible invites non-Westerners to join a universal community, it relegates black subjectivity, construed as barbaric, savage, and ignorant, and Black cultures, non-existent or to be assimilated, to the periphery. While both Christian and Hebrew sacred texts are inclusive, at some level, in that they embrace different peoples and cultures, they both, nonetheless, also include exclusive attitudes. There is no evidence of anti-black sentiment in biblical Israel, according to David M. Goldenberg, but social—slavery and its association with blacks—and linguistic—Ham etymologically signifying “dark, brown, and black”—are factors which later influenced

⁶ “Philosophy and Theology as Political Practices,” *Parables and Fables* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 32–68, 57. See also Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁷ *God’s Word* (New Jersey: International Bible Society, 1984).

⁸ Marquand, 75.

⁹ Muse E. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 6–7.

interpretations of biblical stories such as Noah's curse of slavery on Canaan. The association of blackness with servitude also makes its appearance in 17th century Islamic texts at a time of Islamic conquests in Africa. The Christian Bible later also espoused the view of African servitude. These negative views of Blacks were appropriated mainly to support racial ideologies ensuring the dominance of Europeans over indigenous people.¹⁰ William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom* well delineates how religion served racial ideologies when Rev. Pinchen informs Hannah who had inquired if he had seen her dead husband in his dream that he did not "go amongst the niggers."¹¹ Black subjects and spaces were, thus, constructed according to a Western gaze grounded in biblical interpretation.

To be a Christian, for a non-Westerner, is to embrace the Western concept of God and a Western subjectivity as Chinua Achebe so well illustrates in *Things Fall Apart*.¹² This assimilationist propensity explains the need for the 17th century Kongolese Beatrice Kimpa Vita to appropriate Western Christian discourse and to place African subjectivity at the center of Christian biblical discourse. To be agent in Christianity and to center Kongolese subjectivity in Western biblical rhetoric, Kimpa Vita contextualizes Christ's becoming within the Kongolese space and becomes a central voice through her incarnation of Saint Anthony, pretension to have an immaculate pregnancy, and her supposed resurrections. In her revised history of Christianity, Saint Francis, Jesus, and Mary become Kongolese. Her comments on the Salva Regina inscribe Kongo culture and worldview in an otherwise Western rhetoric.¹³ Because power is inextricably intertwined with language and stories are vital to our subjectivities, Kimpa is burnt at the stakes by three priests and the royal council for heresy. Likewise, Alice Walker's Celia develops, in the *Color Purple*, an Afro-centric image of God.¹⁴

How then do non-Western readers of sacred texts whose origins lie out of their traditional geographies and or cultural origins project their subjectivity within those narratives which marginalize and victimize

¹⁰ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 97–100.

¹¹ "The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom," in *Black Theater U.S.A.* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 36–58.

¹² *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 144–183.

¹³ John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 114–118.

¹⁴ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 138–141.

them? These texts can only be read within the cultural and religious hybridizations depicted in Viviana Diaz Balsera's "The Shaman Meets the Poet: Maria Sabina and the Curative Powers of the Word."

The changes religious rhetoric undergoes, as it travels throughout our global world, are reflections of the centrality of humans, their desires, and ability to think, act and exercise their power on their environment. But these changes foremost reveal the fluid and changing nature of our subjectivities that we desire fixed but are continually restructured by political and economic forces and identity politics that assert our human need to be subjects.

THE SHAMAN MEETS THE POET: MARÍA SABINA AND THE CURATIVE POWERS OF LANGUAGE

Viviana Díaz Balsera

Since pre-Hispanic times in Mexico, the use of the *teonanacatl* or psilocybe mushrooms has been a gateway to the Mesoamerican realm of the sacred. Teonanacatl, a voice in Nahuatl, means flesh of the gods. The mushrooms were named not according to their chemical and/or botanical properties, but according to the lofty experience their ingestion was deemed to provide: access to the space of the gods. When a healer traveled to this realm aided by the hallucinogen, it was believed s/he could see the hidden causes of maladies, operate on them, and provide a cure. S/he could see the origins of things, and anticipate those to come; s/he could identify guardian spirits, recover lost souls, and find valuable objects. S/he could obtain answers from the gods and from the dead to pressing questions afflicting the people. The famous twentieth-century Mazatec healer and woman of knowledge María Sabina ingested teonanacatl in her traditional curative practices, which mixed in the sixteenth century with Christian superhuman and supernatural entities that crossed the Atlantic to inhabit Mexican lands. In this essay I will discuss how María Sabina embodies the deep-seated legacy of a Mesoamerican competence to encompass and endure that since the colonial period has been laboring to conserve pockets of the pre-Hispanic realm of the sacred, amidst careful observance of the dominant, transcontinental Christian pantheon. Such a legacy is of great importance in the conversation about the specific dimensions of multicultural dynamics in the archives of Latin American history and imagination up to our time.

Although the historical record is lean and much of it comes from post-Conquest Hispanic colonial sources, some historians and cultural anthropologists believe that healers and sorcerers during pre-Hispanic Mexico may have also acted as official, specialized priests.¹ These priests

¹ See Henry Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *The Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10. *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part One*, eds. Gordon F. Ekholm e Ignacio Bernal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 439;

or *tlamacazque* were usually in charge of conducting Mexica state-organized religious celebrations named by Spanish missionary ethnographers “calendrical rituals.” The latter took place in each of the twenty months of eighteen days of the Mesoamerican solar year. Elaborate, public and semi-public sacrifices were offered to the indigenous gods in order to elicit their timely reciprocity, manage their recurring forces, and secure the maintenance of the community. Human beings were sacrificed in minutely established ways so that the terrifying warmth and energy of their hearts would feed the deities. This in turn enabled them to provide the community with the abundance and goods it needed to survive and prosper.² Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano points out that in spite of its organizational complexity, Mexica state religion preserved many shamanistic traits, among them the use of hallucinogens to induce altered states of consciousness.³ The psilocybe mushrooms may have been consumed in some of these public, calendrical rituals to achieve ecstatic trances. Other scholars believe, however, that priests and healers operated in socially hierarchical and differentiated realms: the former participated in compulsory corporative practices geared towards the preservation of the community, whereas the latter engaged primarily in the more domestic, private realm of the individual.⁴ In this realm, ritual labor was directed towards the well-being of the individual and his or her family. It is here where healers and/or priests would have most likely ingested the *teonanacatl* in order to serve their clients.

Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, *Aztec Medicine, Health and Nutrition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 67–68; David Tavárez, *Invisible Wars: Idolatry Extirpation Projects and Native Responses in Nahua and Zapotec Communities, 1536–1728* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 2000), 37–39.

² Any ethnohistorical study of pre-Hispanic Mexican religious practices will discuss ritual celebrations at length. For perhaps the best account by Spanish missionaries who arrived to Mexico shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and named these pre-Hispanic celebrations “calendrical rituals,” see Bernardino de Sahagún: *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain*, 12 vols., eds. and trans. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, NM and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1953–1982), especially Books 2 and 3. See also volume one of Diego Durán, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme* [History of the Indies of New Spain], 2 vols., ed. Angel M. Garibay (México: Porrúa, [1867–1880] 1984). For an excellent contemporary overview of these rituals, see Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico.”

³ Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, *Aztec Medicine*, 67–68.

⁴ Nancy Fariss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule. The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 287–293.

Another related pre-Hispanic social context for the ingestion of hallucinogens may have been more private, elitist religious feasts and/or gatherings in which the celebrated Mexican songs or *Cantares mexicanos* were produced. The songs were collected by Nahuatl grammarians under the direction of Franciscan missionaries in the mid-sixteenth century, but believed to be a pre-Hispanic genre.⁵ Eliciting visions of intense beauty, courage and melancholy, many of them were sung in order to establish contact with protector gods. The songs were represented graphically by volutes coming out from the mouth, adorned with flowers and they were often referred to as *(in) xochitl (in) cuicatl*: flowers and songs. R. Gordon Wasson, a renowned ethnomycologist in the cultural areas of Siberia and North and Central America, has suggested that the flowers so often linked to these songs are a figure of the psilocybe mushrooms, also known as *xochinanacatl*, flower mushrooms.⁶ In some of these songs, particularly the *xochicuicatl* or song of the flowers, reference is made to “threads of flowers” coming forth from the lips.⁷ These threads may be thought to mean the great facility of language unlocked by the use of the psilocybe mushrooms, as we will discuss very soon. And indeed, the sixteenth-century missionary ethnographer Diego Durán names “feast of revelations” one such exclusive gathering among kings and nobles that the last Mexican king, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, instituted three times a year, and in which *teonanacatl* where ingested by the attendants.⁸

With the arrival of Spaniards in the sixteenth century, the construct of the Mesoamerican sacred was deeply intervened by Catholic Christianity. Many indigenous conceptions of the divine were shunned, and institutionalized ritual practices were made illicit and punishable. One of the very first things imposed by the Spanish victors was the prohibition of human sacrifice and the cessation of at least most of the public calendrical feasts honoring the indigenous gods. The *tlamacazque*, for-

⁵ Mexican anthropologists Angel Garibay and Miguel León-Portilla and North American ethnohistorian James Lockhart have discussed the *Cantares mexicanos* as an essentially pre-Hispanic oral genre. See Angel Garibay, *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, 2 vols. (México: Porrúa, 1953), 1: 109–150; Miguel León-Portilla, *Literaturas indígenas de México* (Madrid: MAPFRE, 1992), 223–255; and Lockhart *Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 393–399.

⁶ Gordon R. Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom. Mycolatry in Mesoamerica* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 79–92.

⁷ Garibay, *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, 1:88.

⁸ Diego Durán, *Historia de los indios de Nueva España*, 2:416.

merly conservers of the community and mediators between gods and humans, now were seen as ministers of the Devil. The ecstatic use and effects of the *teonanacatl* were also associated by the Christian Western imagination to the satanic. In the first chronicle about the pre-Hispanic past and the first decades of the religious colonization of Mexico by the Spaniards, the Franciscan missionary Fray Toribio de Benavente's (Motolinía or "the poor one"), writes about the mushrooms:

They (the Nahuas) had another way of becoming intoxicated, which rendered them more cruel. This was by means of some fungi of small mushrooms which are found in this land as well as in Castile. But the ones in this land... incite the Indians to drinking when eaten raw or with a little honey. The result is that the Indians soon have a thousand visions, especially of snakes. Being entirely bereft of their senses, they imagine that their legs and body are covered with worms which are eating them alive.... These mushrooms they call in their language *teonanacatl*, which means "flesh of god," that is, flesh of the demon whom they worship.⁹

In this passage we can see a clear, yet decontextualized representation of the *psilocybe* mushrooms as a toxic substance that induces frenzied visions of terror and death. The mushrooms as 'flesh of god' produce satanic visions in which the creatures that appear, snakes and worms, are those traditionally associated by Christianity to evil. The mushrooms are also seen as diabolic because they presumably derange the mind and induce people to give themselves up to an abject sensuality of terror.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the missionaries honed their linguistic skills in Nahuatl and gained more knowledge and control over the cultural worlds of their Nahua flock. At least three catastrophic plagues or *cocoliztli* scourged the land, reducing the indigenous population by the millions and thus sinisterly broaching the new colonial era and order of things.¹⁰ Scores of idols and their temples were destroyed.

⁹ Toribio de Benavente, Motolinía. *History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. Francis Borgia Steck (Washington: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1951), 96. Motolinía was one of the first twelve Franciscan missionaries arriving to Mexico in 1524, two years after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. In 1541 he finished his *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (History of the Indians of New Spain) the first chronicle to cover the historical period that ranged between the immediate Mexica pre-Hispanic past to the first two decades of the Franciscan mission in New Spain. Motolinía's chronicle, along with many others written by missionaries, remained unpublished until after Mexican Independence in the nineteenth century. This passage has been extensively quoted as one of the important colonial sources referring to the practice of ingesting the *psilocybe* mushrooms.

¹⁰ There were three major epidemics ravaging the Valley of Mexico during the six-

Multitudes of Indians received baptism and dutifully went to Mass on Sundays. Churches and monasteries were built in the Indian towns or *altepetl* and the residency of friars would be sought in earnest as a mark of high *altepetl* status. After all the violence and terror of the conquest, the word of Christ had finally come to dwell in the lands of Anahuac. And yet—many friars would complain—a disquietly large number of baptized Indians still secretly served and made offerings to their old pre-Hispanic deities. As one Indian memorably confessed to Dominican missionary Diego Durán, they [the Indians] were still *nepantla* or in between: “aún permanecían en medio y eran neutros” [they were neuter and still in the middle].¹¹

In the seventeenth century and beyond, although the Catholic Church and the Spanish state were firmly in place and despite the fact that the institutionalized pre-Hispanic religious practices by which the people had been ruled were now something of the past for the post-Conquest, post-epidemic Indian generations, the Mesoamerican realm of the sacred in the lands of Anahuac would still keep its hold. There were perhaps too many needs that had to do with the more domestic dimension of bodily illnesses and afflictions, with knowledge of lucky or unlucky days for traditional economic activities such as sowing, reaping, fishing and selling, that Christianity was unable to fulfill. It is in this gap where the figure of the healer—which in twentieth century anthropological literature has been more generally denominated as shaman—would keep fulfilling an important social function. Possibly much as in pre-Hispanic times, the healer or shaman in colonial times would be in charge of manipulating the sacred realm of superhuman powers on behalf of his or her patients, but now going underground and occasionally bringing to his aid some of the new Christian deities that had arrived to the land.¹²

teenth century. The first one, smaller in scale, came during the siege of Tenochtitlan in 1520–21, greatly helping the invading Spaniards to defeat the Mexica. The second *cocolitzli*, the most devastating of them all hit in 1545–48, wiping out at least three-fourths of the indigenous population, according to the friars' calculations. The third epidemic came between 1576 and 1580, reducing the indigenous population to two million. See Jonathan Israel, *Race, Class and Politics in Colonial Mexico, 1610–1670* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 13–17.

¹¹ Diego Durán, *Historia de los indios de Nueva España*, 1: 237.

¹² This is Serge Gruzinski's argument in *The Conquest of Mexico. The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th–18th Centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 146–183.

The term *šaman* was codified in 1650's by a priest named Avvakum, exiled to Central Siberia where lived the Evenki, a reindeer-hunting group. The term was adapted by Russian, and passed on to the Western languages as "shaman." Until the early twentieth century, it was usually used to denominate only religious practitioners from different tribes in Siberia. But from the 1950's on, particularly since the landmark book by Mircea Eliade on shamanism, the term has been extended in the Western history of religions to refer to ritual specialists employing non-Western methods to contact the spirit world in order to heal both body and soul.¹³ Piers Vitebsky states that shamanism is a network of culturally-based practices, which can be identified all around the world, and which is usually performed side by side other religious beliefs and doctrines. He adds that "there is no doctrine, no world shamanic church...no priests with authority to tell us what is and what is not correct."¹⁴ Regardless of this absence of globalized institutionalized forms, there are striking similarities in shamanistic sensibilities and beliefs even in cultures far apart and with no known contact. One common motif in shamanistic discourse and practice is the belief that superhuman, invisible forces have such a concrete, material existence that their imbalances and onslaughts can affect the well-being both of the soul and the body of humans. In the case of colonial Mexico, the realm of superhuman, sacred forces was believed to be immediately interdependent with vital entities residing in the human body such as the *tonalli* and the *teyolía*. These two entities in turn coexisted or were even mixed with the Christian construct of the soul.¹⁵ Thus, from an

¹³ Neil Price, "An Archaeology of Altered States: Shamanism and Material Culture Studies," in *The Archaeology of Shamanism*, ed. Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2001), 3–16. Eliade's book is entitled *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*. It was published in 1951 (Paris, Librairie Payot).

¹⁴ Piers Vitebsky, *Shamanism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2001), 11.

¹⁵ Indeed, since colonial times the Nahuatl vital entity known as the *tonalli* was identified with the Christian concept of the soul. However, they are far from being identical. The *tonalli* is an animic force that confers to the individual energy, heat, courage and the capacity to grow. It is a force linked to breath, warmth, and is lodged in the head. The *tonalli* is also a force in which gods, animals, plants and even things partake, and is associated to the specific character of the twenty Mesoamerican day-signs. The *tonalli* can separate itself from the body, and in specific circumstances, this separation may cause sickness and even death. One common function among shamans is to restore lost *tonalli* to their clients. Differently from the Christian soul, however, this vital entity does not live on after death. The vital force linked to the world of the dead is the *teyolía*, which resides in the heart and cannot abandon the body until its demise. Because of its overlaps with the Christian concept of the soul, the *teyolía* has also been identified with

indigenous colonial point of view, the pragmatic, multiple functions of the healer as medicine man, diviner, finder of valuable lost things and as a restorer of lost tonalli or soul, did not necessarily represent a deliberate, theological or doctrinal confrontation with the recently-arrived religion of Christianity. Moreover, and as was mentioned earlier, not infrequently was the Catholic repertoire of saints and other figures of the sacred added to the local pantheon of invoked Mesoamerican deities. It was not unusual that, at least as a matter of political convenience, the colonial healer—called *curandero* by the Spaniards—would also be a practitioner of the Christian faith. It must be pointed out however that in the most important treatises about indigenous magical incantations in Central Mexico during the seventeenth century, spells were mostly addressed to old, transhistorical pre-Hispanic deities such as Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl.

An important case in point about a colonial indigenous healer or shaman who also used *teonanacatl* in his healing practices is documented in Jacinto de la Serna's 1656 manual for the extirpation of native idolatrous practices and beliefs still current in Central Mexico written for ministers. Along with Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's *Tratado sobre supersticiones y hechicerías* [Treatise of Superstitions] and Pedro Ponce's much shorter *Breve relación de los dioses y ritos de la gentilidad* [Brief Account of the Gods and Rituals of Gentility] Serna's treatise is an invaluable source of indigenous colonial magical and healing practices during the seventeenth century, some of which have continued at least until the twentieth.¹⁶ A great portion of Serna's reported magical incantations are based on Ruiz de Alarcón's earlier work, but he also

it since colonial times, particularly by the missionaries. Franciscan Alonso de Molina, who wrote the most important bilingual vocabulary Spanish-Nahuatl (1551), Nahuatl-Spanish (1571) in the sixteenth century (still in use today), makes a correspondence between the Spanish term 'alma' and the Nahuatl 'teyolia' Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana* (México: Porrúa [1571] 1992), 9a, 95b. For a more detailed discussion of the vital Nahua forces in question see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia. El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (México: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1963), 105–108; and Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, 2 vols. (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980), 1: 197–262.

¹⁶ The full title of Serna's treatise is *Manual para los ministros de indios para conocimiento de sus idolatrías y extirpacion de ellas*. All three seventeenth-century treatises remained unpublished until the nineteenth century. They appear in the two volumes of the *Tratado de las idolatrías, supersticiones, dioses, ritos, hechicerías y otras costumbres gentílicas de las razas aborígenes de México* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Fuente Cultural [1892] 1953).

adds personal testimonies of “idolatrous” practices that he himself witnessed or tried to eradicate. Three times rector of the University of Mexico and chaplain of the Cathedral of Mexico, Serna recounts in his *Manual para ministros de los indios* how in the town of Tenantzinco he himself had tried to imprison a curandero named Juan Chichiton who had presided over a feast in which teonanacatl had been ingested. Serna explains how native priests went to the mountains to collect the mushrooms, stayed up all night praying and then, at dawn, as soon as a certain kind of morning wind blew: “los cogian atribuyendoles Deidad” [they collected them attributing to them divinity].¹⁷ Significantly, the holiday in which the mushrooms were consumed under the direction of Juan Chichiton was that of a saint, and the image of the latter was present in an altar in the interior of the house in which the celebration took place. A fire burned under the altar, and there was singing throughout the night at the sound of the *teponaztli* or native drum. Finally, “el dicho Iuan Chichiton, que era el Sacerdote de aquella solemnidad, les dio a todos los circunstantes que se auian juntado á la fiesta, á comer de los hongos como á modo de comunión” [the said Juan Chichiton, who was the priest of that solemnity, gave all the people who had gathered for the feast, to eat the mushrooms in the manner of communion].¹⁸ It is important to emphasize the reverence with which the feast was celebrated, the fact that Juan Chichiton was both a native priest and a medicine man, that divine qualities were attributed to the mushrooms by him and most probably by the native participants in the ceremony, the presence of the Christian saint, and finally, the alarmed, yet suggestive comparison of the ingestion of the mushrooms with that of the sacrament of communion made by Serna. Many, if not most of these elements, would be present three hundred years later in María Sabina’s night vigils.

The existence María Sabina was made known to the world by R. Gordon Wasson, independent student of the history of hallucinogenic mushrooms in Eurasia and the Americas, particularly Central and Southern Mexico. He visited Sabina in Huatla, Oaxaca, in 1955, and ate the psilocybe mushrooms with her in a shamanistic *velada*, or night vigil. He published an account of his experience in *Life*, May 13, 1957, the same year in which he published with his wife Valentina Pavlovna a

¹⁷ Serna, *Manual para los ministros*, 1: 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

two-volume work entitled *Mushrooms Russia & History*.¹⁹ Afterwards, legions of hippies, other spiritual seekers and even super-stars flooded Huautla to eat the mushrooms. There are rumors that she was visited in the sixties by Western superstars such as The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones.²⁰ There are scholarly writings, doctoral dissertations, newspaper articles, and dozens of websites about her; at least two recordings of her chants, one documentary, and one play about her written by Spanish Nobel Laureate Camilo José Cela.²¹ But perhaps the most important source for the life of María Sabina is the *Vida de María Sabina, la sabia de los hongos* (*María Sabina, Wise-Woman of the Mushrooms*) a construction of her autobiography based on taped interviews in Mazatec with bilingual anthropologist Alvaro Estrada, and then transcribed and translated into Spanish by Estrada himself.²² Already a national figure of renown, María Sabina's *Vida* was first published in 1977 by the prestigious publishing house Siglo XXI in Mexico.²³ The *Vida* was translated into English by Henry Munn in

¹⁹ Gordon Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom*, xvi.

²⁰ Benjamin Feinberg, *The Devil's Book of Culture. History, Mushrooms, and Caves in Southern Mexico* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2003), 153.

²¹ Although not extensive, there is enough bibliography on María Sabina as to justify the assertion that she is a familiar figure in Mesoamerican anthropology circles. For a selection of important pieces published on her as well as the recordings, see Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *María Sabina, Selections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 201–204. The documentary is entitled *María Sabina: mujer espíritu* [María Sabina: Woman Spirit], directed by Nicolás Echevarría. It premiered in Mexico City in 1979. Cela's play, *María Sabina y el carro de heno, o el inventor de las guillotinas* [María Sabina and the Cart of Hay or the Inventor of Guillotines] was published in Madrid (Biblioteca Jucar, 1974).

²² Because of the scope of this essay, I am unable to enter into the discussion of the manifold aspects of the constructed nature of María's *The Life*, an oral testimony rendered into the literary form of autobiography by a second, literate party, and how these factors may impinge on the truth claims of the text. Let us reserve the discussion of María Sabina's *The Life* as belonging to the twentieth-century genre of the testimony for another occasion.

²³ The full reference is María Sabina and Alvaro Estrada, *Vida de María Sabina: la sabia de los hongos* [Life of María Sabina: Wise-Woman of the Mushrooms], (México: Siglo XXI, 1977). It must be pointed out, however, that because of her international fame María Sabina was criticized by some prominent Mexican intellectuals and writers for having given away the secret of the psilocybe mushrooms to foreigners like Gordon Wasson. Others derided her notoriety in Mexico as a youth counter-culture fad that had originated in the United States. Although these nationalistic controversies surely impinge on the stature of María Sabina as a Latin American cultural figure, it is beyond the purview of this essay to examine all their essentialist and patronizing assumptions. For an overview of the polemic see Heriberto Yépez's "Clock Woman in the Land of Mixed Feelings: the Place of María Sabina in Mexican Culture," http://www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses/yepez_clock.html.

1981 and it has been reprinted in the *Poets for the Millennium* series published by the University of California Press in 2003. I will be using this last edition as the textual source for her life.²⁴

María Sabina was born in the Sierra Mazateca of Huautla, in the province of Oaxaca, Mexico possibly in 1894. A baptized Catholic, she belonged to a very poor family, and lost her father when she was only three. According to her constructed autobiography, the mortal sickness of her father, Crisanto Feliciano was the result of having accidentally burned some corn plants, a crop zealously protected by the Lord of the Thunder.²⁵ Trying to save himself, Crisanto went to see his own father and grandfather, men of knowledge who used the psilocybe mushrooms, but to no avail since “little can be done against the curse of the Lord of Thunder.”²⁶ What is of interest is not only the sad story of illness afflicting María Sabina’s father who died a few years later after the incident, but also the specific hybrid form of the Mazatec realm of the sacred as expounded by María Sabina as late as 1976. At the moment of enouncing the story or her life, the autobiographical subject is at least eighty years old. She is a devoted Catholic and belongs to the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Along with the sisters of her society, she is responsible for sponsoring a monthly mass for the Sacred Heart, and also the yearly feast of the Virgin of the Nativity, which falls on the third Sunday of March.²⁷ The commitment to her Christian duties and activities does not inhibit the autobiographical subject from enunciating her belief in the power of the Lord of the Thunder, Chicón Nindó. He belongs to the local register of superhuman powers, so to speak, but his onslaughts are mortal and devastating. And although María Sabina’s father had burnt the sacred crop unintentionally, prayed devoutly and offered many gifts of restitution, the fatal forces of the Lord of Thunder were not to be appeased. It must be pointed out that this lord is not posited in the narrative as challenging, overturning or superseding the much greater allotted might of Jesus Christ; however, neither does the latter seemingly intervene in the province of the former: “little can be done against the curse of the Lord of Thunder.”²⁸ In the Mazatec

²⁴ The full reference is María Sabina and Alvaro Estrada, *The Life*, trans. Henry Munn, in *María Sabina: Selections*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3–79.

²⁵ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁸ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 7.

realm of the sacred then, there are superhuman powers that affect people, other than the prodigious, malignant ones of the Devil and/or the supernatural of the Christian god. Although sometimes fatal, these local superhuman powers coexist with Christ's in a relation that is not necessarily antagonistic. They inhabit concrete geographical spaces such as mountains, rivers, and lakes. Many sorcerers and curers tap these local powers and use them as helpers in their magical tasks.²⁹

But María Sabina would choose to consecrate herself only to the Christian God, the Virgin and the saints. When she was in her twenties, during the sickness of her sister María Ana, having called curers and healers to no avail, María Sabina decided to ingest the psilocybe mushrooms in order to save her. She had eaten mushrooms many times as a girl, but this was the first time she ingested them for a specific healing purpose. As was the Mazatec tradition of the *velada* for this end, she took the mushrooms at night using scented flowers, candles of wax, copal and San Pedro.³⁰ Then she had an anointing vision in which knowledge was irreversibly conferred upon her.

Having ingested the mushrooms, María Sabina saw, heard and even felt six to eight people sitting behind a table, reading papers or busily looking for something in them. They acted and looked like governmental bureaucrats, handling documents of great importance. María called them "the Principal Ones of whom my ancestors spoke."³¹ It is difficult to tell how far back María envisioned her ancestors to go, but their very mention would seem to allude to indigenous cultures in Mexico in which ancestors were considered important and prestigious agents for the reproduction of knowledge. Although donning human form, these seemingly lettered Principal Ones were not of flesh and bone. Nor was their substance that of water or corn.³² They were a hierophany: a visual and aural manifestation of the psilocybe mushrooms as sacred powers. These bureaucratic figures gave María a human-sized book in which their knowledge was inscribed, and then they disappeared.³³

María Sabina started to recite by heart the contents of this Book without touching or turning its pages. Although she had most likely seen

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

³⁰ Ibid., 22. San Pedro is a mixture of tobacco with lime and garlic. It has a ceremonial use and is deemed to be able to fend off the evil forces of sorcery. See Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 12n10.

³¹ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 21.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 21–22.

books, and maybe even thumbed through them before the vision, they had never been an integral part of her life. The unprecedented, unearthly quality of this book language lay in the fact that María acquired it in one sitting, and without ever having learned how to read or write. It is then as if in her vision of anointment the mushrooms offered her, among other things, the capacity to access the most ancient depths of Western, Christian colonial authority, allowing her to master once and for all the immense powers of learning and permanence that lie in the letter. And indeed, in her later visions “the Book no longer appeared because I already had its contents in my memory.”³⁴ María would not need to read again since she had received in her vision of anointment the one and only book she needed in order to become a knower of the source of all knowledge. The figures of Western literacy and of the Book are thus encompassed in the anointing as a guarantee of its goodness, authority, and perfection. But this Book is not the Bible. Western literacy and the Book as figures of authority do not override the power of the *teonanacatl* or little-ones-who-spring-forth, who are the producers of the vision. A significant aspect of María’s anointing vision as a perfect being (“I had attained perfection”)³⁵ is what Bernard and Gruzinski have masterfully denominated “the plasticity of native cultures” referring to the colonial encounters of the sixteenth century and beyond.³⁶ This cultural plasticity lies in María Sabina’s ability to wield the Western imagination of the letter and of the Book as a highest source of authority both from within and from without Western Christian colonial hegemonic discourses, with no anxiety of resistance or contradiction. Just before her vision of anointment she says to the mushrooms: “I will take your blood. I will take your heart. Because my conscience is pure, is clean as yours. Give me truth. May Saint Peter and Saint Paul be with me.”³⁷ According to this prayer of invocation, María hopes that Saint Peter and Saint Paul will support her desire for truth when she takes the mushrooms and addresses the latter as flesh, as having blood and heart, much as if they were the redeeming, healing body of Christ in the Eucharist itself, or the consecrated bread

³⁴ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 22.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Carmen Bernard and Serge Gruzinski, *De la idolatría. Una arqueología de las ciencias religiosas* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 104.

³⁷ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 23.

transubstantiated in the psilocybe mushrooms.³⁸ The memory of human blood and hearts offered in pre-Hispanic times to the Mesoamerican deities also resonate in these words. While the Roman Catholic Church would undoubtedly condemn these ways of addressing the mushrooms as outright heretical, in María's hybrid discourse of supplication it is a confluence; a continuous, clean stream of the sacred. She also calls the *teonanacatl* saint little children.

The saint little mushrooms do listen, and María Sabina is able to cure her sister with the language conferred by the Book of their flesh. María has become a woman of knowledge who will henceforth be able to heal with few resources other than her language. It should be remarked, however, that although María's language has unique features and ways of treating the topic of spiritual knowledge, many of its formal aspects are part of an established discursive practice. To start with, and as Henry Munn has pointed out: "The phenomenon most distinctive of the mushrooms' effect is the inspired capacity to speak."³⁹ Overall, the wise men and women or shamans using mushrooms usually experience a great enhancement of their linguistic capacities. In Western medical terms, it may be thought that psilocybin stimulates parts of the brain that have to do with verbal aptitude. Besides this common experience of a heightened sense of language, there is a conventional structure informing the chants supposedly dictated by the little saint children to their chosen wise ones. Long litanies of short lines end with the epiphora "tso" (translated from the Mazatec as "[he] says").⁴⁰ The epiphora refers to the mushrooms as subjects of enunciation.⁴¹ The actual speaker positions himself or herself as mediator, not as the producer

³⁸ Transubstantiation is the theological term to denominate the conversion of the host into the actual body of Christ while preserving the material form of the bread. The transubstantiation of the bread into the body of Christ occurs in the Mass, when the officiating priest consecrates the host.

³⁹ Henry Munn, "The Mushrooms of Language," in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael J. Harner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 122. Munn was an independent researcher in the use of hallucinogens by the Mazatec Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico, and of the Conibo Indians of Peru. His article "The Mushrooms of Language" is a classic piece in the literature on shaman María Sabina and in the use of psilocybe mushrooms by the Mazatecs.

⁴⁰ Gordon Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom*, 39.

⁴¹ Epiphora (also epistrophe and antistrophe) is the repetition of one or more words at the end of a line, phrase or clause, and / or at the end of a stanza. It is a figure of language, as it involves patterns of word distribution. See T.V.F. Brogan, "Anaphora," in *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 73.

of discourse: "The simultaneous reference to himself in the first and third person as subject and object indicates the impersonal personality of his utterances."⁴² The language of the mushrooms is posited not as a product of the shaman in question, but as a radically intersubjective phenomenon. The *teonanacatl* speak through the *I* of the person who has ingested them by becoming the person referring to him or herself. This radical intersubjectivity of the enunciating voice as well as the recurrent epiphoral use of "tso" in the chants is, at least at the level of discourse analysis, a rhetorical source of authority. It alludes to a traditional, established structure that is not of the enunciating subject's own fabrication. In Benjamin Feinberg's postmodern anthropological view of Mazatec shamanistic mushroom experience, more than Munn's "impersonal" dimension, he sees a metacultural discourse that seeks to produce images of self-legitimation by mimicking the available, socially-shared signifiers of power and authority.⁴³

Another feature of the chants common to modern Mazatec shamans (or to modern Mazatec shamanistic discourse) is "the invocatory reiteration of names."⁴⁴ Many of these names belong to a Latin American colonial tradition of Spanish Christian culture, much like some characters we have seen in María's vision of anointment. The names may also call forth the local powers of the mountains, lakes, rivers, and caves, in a hybrid constellation of the Mesoamerican and Spanish/Western sacred. After having learned by heart the contents of her Book, for instance, María sees the Mazatec deity Chicón Nindó riding towards her in a beautiful white horse.⁴⁵ The cultural crossing of this figure with the Apostle Santiago (James)—patron of Christian Spain—and his white horse is unavoidable, albeit with a twist. For Chicón Nindó is a local power and not a colonialist figure like Santiago Matamoros whose symbolic role was precisely the eradication of local superhuman forces in favor of a Christian transcontinental realm. What should be underscored here, however, is that regardless of new, hybridized layers

⁴² Munn, "The Mushrooms of Language," 108.

⁴³ Metacultural discourses are discourses that report and/or reproduce specific cultural practices or ideologies, modifying them by the very act of reporting itself. See Feinberg's discussion of this term in *The Devil's Book of Culture*, 8–19. For a fuller rendition of the figure of María Sabina as a practitioner of a commodified shamanistic discourse, see *ibid.*, esp. 126–90.

⁴⁴ Herny Munn, "The Mushrooms of Language," 117.

⁴⁵ This is the deity that took away the life of María Sabina's father discussed above.

of meanings that the shaman may be producing in his or her chants, the names invoked in them—much like their conventional structure—belong to cultural traditions that constitute identity for the community in which the shaman lives. They are not only part of his or her private history. The invocation of these culturally significant names emphasize the rhetorical authority of the chants and of the visions as coming from a place other than the enunciating subject's personal imagination.

What is this language given by the flesh of the gods like? In a chant recorded by Gordon Wasson at a vigil that took place on July 21–22 of 1956, the following are some excerpts of what the little ones had María Sabina say:

I am a woman born
 I am a woman fallen into the world
 I am a law woman
 I am a woman of thought
 I am a woman who gives life
 I am a woman who reanimates
 I have the heart of Christ, says
 I have the heart of the Virgin...
 I have the heart of the Father
 I have the heart of the Old One
 It's that I have the same soul, the same heart as the santo,
 As the santa, says...⁴⁶

María Sabina herself explains about lines similar to these that “the little things are the ones who speak. If I say: ‘I am a woman who fell out by herself...’ they say that because they spring up by themselves. Nobody plants them. They spring up because God wants them to.”⁴⁷ As was discussed above, in the chants the mushrooms speak through the I of the person who has ingested them by becoming the very person referring to herself. The subject is both I and the other by whom the I speaks. The posited rhetorical structure of this relationship is thus beyond the metaphorical. In metaphor (*the wings of your voice*), the tenor (or referent: *persuasiveness*) and vehicle (or figurative term: *wings*) never fully become one: they preserve their distinctive identities so that the substitution of the tenor by the vehicle can be more striking and/or suggestive. When metaphor manifests its mechanisms of identity more openly like in “*You are the sea*”, the transubstantiation of identity,

⁴⁶ Sabina and Estrada, *The Life*, 85–86.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 41.

although stated, is not fully assumed to be performed so that the play of difference (or distinct identities) can go on.⁴⁸ According to María Sabina's gloss, however, the little ones posit that they fully *become* the identity of the speaker because there are analogies between them. Actually, not figuratively, the mushrooms become a woman born, fallen into the world. And in so becoming, they disclose dimensions of María Sabina's being that she may have never been able to declare in her conscious, everyday self. When the little ones embody themselves in María Sabina, she reaches heights of being she would have been incapable of accessing on her own. Thus, she hears them say through her that they/she is a being of order, of thought, of things that are right and without stain. The perlocutory effects of comfort and assurance produced by the illocutionary, assertoric force of these utterances about cleanliness is constitutive of the healing thrust of her language.⁴⁹

María Sabina then goes further saying that the "I is an other" structure of the mushrooms as herself has the heart of Christ, of the Virgin, of the Father, and of the Old One. Both the pre-Hispanic sacrificial emphasis on the human heart⁵⁰ and the Christian display of the hearts of Jesus and of the Virgin, who also sacrificed themselves for the well-being of humanity, resonate in the meaning of these lines. According to the rules and relations of identities asserted by the Book of their flesh, when the *teonanacatl* are embodied in María Sabina they become the possessors of the divine pulse of Christ, of the Virgin Mary and of God the Father Himself. Again and again, the Mesoamerican flesh of

⁴⁸ For a good working definition of metaphor see Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 134. For more detailed discussion of the mechanics, definition and philosophical history of this trope, see Wallace Martin, "Metaphor" in *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 760–66 and cross references. See also Angelo Marchese and Joaquín Forradellas, *Diccionario de retórica, crítica y terminología literaria* [Dictionary of Rhetoric, Criticism, and Literary Terminology] (Barcelona: Ariel, 1986), 132–133.

⁴⁹ I am using the concept of perlocutory act in John L. Austin's sense of an effect caused in a hearer by the illocutionary force of a sentence uttered as an assertion or as something that is being claimed to hold. The range of these speech-act concepts is expounded in Austin's classic *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). Although problematic and still under contestation by linguists and philosophers of language, I believe Austin's concepts are a useful shorthand for sketching the mode in which the mushrooms are taken to speak and work through María Sabina according to Sabina herself. For a more detailed discussion of these concepts and their problematization see Peter Pagin, "Assertion" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archive/spr2007/entries/assertion>, 2007).

⁵⁰ See the discussion above regarding the calendrical rituals.

the gods incorporates in or through María Sabina's chants the highest, most perfect signifiers of infinite goodness in Western Christian culture. And although many of the posited claims of these chants are theologically unorthodox by Roman Catholic Church standards, the way they seamlessly weave Catholic and Mesoamerican religious concepts, practices and figures nonetheless produce an efficacious language if only for its rhetorical power to cleanse the subject and relieve its bodily dimension from affliction.

In the twentieth-century figure of Mazatec wise woman María Sabina we can see then a Mesoamerican mode of accessing the sacred, hybridizing and hybridized by the Spanish Catholic Christianity brought into the land since colonial times. In the record of her life and chants we can appreciate a specific cultural crossing that emerged since the sixteenth century as a response to the asymmetrical, violent encounter of two systems of imagining the world, and that is still at work in Mexican identity and culture today. Perhaps, however, as some postmodern anthropologists have suggested, María Sabina's chants and autobiography should be read as her own timely, self-serving, commodified mestizaje of cultural topoi of the sacred.⁵¹ In this view, her shamanistic discourse is above all about a way to accrue social prestige and the concomitant wealth that may come attached to it. For some Mexican intellectuals, María Sabina betrayed to foreigners the deepest secrets Mexican Indian culture, contributing to their demise. But the immense rhetorical force of María Sabina's story, the masterful displays of patterned, heightened language and meanings in her chants may not be bound by underlying narratives of self-interest, by nationalist accusations of sell-out, by imperatives to referential truth, or even by the authority of the specific hybrid cultural legacy that I have been emphasizing in this essay. The sheer beauty, depth and power of María Sabina's *Life* and chants make them an indispensable point of reference for students of contemporary Latin American cultural and literary imagination. In her language, at the very least, the asserting, indigenous subject in the figure of healer has produced an uncanny poetry of deliverance by ingesting the mushrooms of Mesoamerican antiquity in order to speak the divine flesh of God Jesus Christ.

⁵¹ Feinberg, *The Devil's Book of Culture*, 129–90.

FROM HAGGADIC EXEGESIS TO MYTH: POPULAR STORIES OF THE PROPHETS IN ISLAM

Gottfried Hagen

“We will relate to thee the fairest of stories in that We have revealed to thee in this Qur’an, though before it thou wast one of the heedless.”¹ With these words, the Qur’an introduces the only detailed and sustained narrative it contains, Surah 12, named after its hero, the prophet Joseph. It tells the story of the biblical Joseph from his youth through his adventures in Egypt to the reunification with his parents, the only instance where one perceives the “self-sufficient and self-justifying joy in story-telling” in the Qur’an.² Knowledge about the earlier prophets is considered part of the revelation.³ According to a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), there are 124,000 prophets in Islam, 315 of which are also messengers, the distinction being that messengers are not only sent to a specific people, but actually bring a distinct book as part of revelation.⁴ Only a much smaller number is mentioned in the Qur’an by name, and it is largely around those that the genre of “Stories of the Prophets” evolved which is the subject of this article.

References to the earlier prophets mainly serve two distinct purposes in the Qur’an. First, they situate Muhammad in a series of previous revelations mostly from the biblical prophets, and thus assure the messenger and the listener that revelation continues:

¹ Qur’an 12:3, trans. A.J. Arberry. For the convenience of the non-specialist reader, in this article I will use the biblical forms of names. All dates given are CE.

² Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough. Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11. For literature on surah Yusuf see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur’an and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 28–31, and R. Firestone, “YŪSUF b. Ya’qūb” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrich (Leiden: Brill, 2008), Brill Online. Univ. of Michigan-Ann Arbor. 20 August 2008 <http://www.encyislam.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1369>. For a different approach to narrative sections in the Qur’an see Alan Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur’an* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

³ Qur’an 12:102–11 and passim.

⁴ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 118.

We have revealed to thee as We revealed to Noah, and the Prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, Jesus and Job, Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and We gave to David Psalms, and Messengers We have already told thee of before, and Messengers We have not told thee of; [...] But God bears witness to that he has sent down to thee [...].⁵

Second, stories of prophets in the Qur'an very often conform to a certain pattern, according to which a people is sent a prophet, rejects and often attacks him, and ultimately suffers extinction as God's punishment. These narratives are regularly referred to in the literature as punishment stories. As such they serve to strengthen Muhammad and his followers against the doubts and scorn of his Meccan adversaries.⁶ However, the Qur'an does not give the full narrative; rather, due to its "essentially paraenetic character... originally narrative material was reduced almost invariably to a series of discrete and parabolic utterances."⁷

The "distinctly referential, as contrasted with expository, style of the Qur'an"⁸ seems to have a referent outside of the text, presupposing that the audience would be able to supply the necessary background. The rapid expansion of Islam quickly disrupted the fabric of cultural consensus on which this referential style was based. Later reports specifically mention popular preachers, labeled "storytellers" (*qussas*) as disseminators (and many times inventors) of narratives about the prophets, supposedly recording what used to be public knowledge.⁹ In addition, Islamic tradition credits converts from Judaism and scholars with knowledge of Christian and Jewish traditions with contributing to and expanding this background knowledge in the first and second centuries after the Qur'an.¹⁰ Such contributions were acknowledged when Islamic knowledge was systematically collected and unified by

⁵ Qur'an 4:163–4.

⁶ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 7, 14 points to surahs 11, 26, 27, 37, 54 as typical examples which list several examples of prophets according to this pattern.

⁷ John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1. Stetkevych, *Muhammad*, 10, speaks of "narrative stinginess."

⁸ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 1.

⁹ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, see Tilman Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'. Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte* (PhD dissertation, Bonn, 1967), 122–131, Jan Pauliny, "Literarischer Charakter des Werkes Kisā'is Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā", in *Graecolatina et Orientalia* 2 (1970), 107–125.

¹⁰ Ka'b al-Ahbar and Wāḥb b. Munabbih. Although I am using some key notions of Wansbrough's literary approach, for the purpose of this article I do not adopt his radical conclusions regarding the late date of the codification of the Qur'an.

the emerging Islamic scholarship.¹¹ As distinct genres crystallized in the body of extra-Qur'anic tradition, fragments relating to the earlier prophets appeared in four kinds of text, in *hadith*, exegesis, historiography, and the "stories of the prophets" proper. In the *hadith*, the sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad, references are primarily used to make a specific argument. Thus, their function strongly resembles that of the references in the Qur'an; correspondingly, the *hadith* contains few fully developed narratives.¹² The other three genres, on the other hand, did indeed include those. Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and historiography shared an interest in collecting the complete information on the individual prophets. Among the different styles of exegesis, the haggadic approach is the oldest in the Islamic context, and arguably the simplest.¹³ It lends itself particularly to the expansion of stories of the prophets and the history of revelation, none of which in the Qur'an would be intelligible without such elaboration.¹⁴ Similarly, the first grand commentary, by al-Tabari (839–923), included numerous narrative elaborations on the references to prophets before Muhammad.

In al-Tabari's other opus magnum, his world history, much of the same material is assembled in chronological order, giving a continuous account of salvation history from creation to his own time, which for the period before Islam largely consists of the story of the prophets. Al-Tabari was able to draw on some of the earliest works of Islamic historiography in his endeavor, such as Ibn Ishaq's (d. 767) "Life of the prophet".¹⁵ The series of the prophets from Adam to (but not including)

¹¹ For an example of how such a process transformed a body of traditions see Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder. The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims. A Textual Analysis* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995).

¹² Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 122.

¹³ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* 119 sq., the others being halakhic, masoretic, rhetorical and allegorical. The earliest complete commentary on the Qur'an, by Muqatil (d. 767), is a fine example of haggadic exegesis, alternating verses of the Qur'an with a narrative explanation (excerpt in Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets* 99; see also Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 122–131). Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran. An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), has assembled excerpts from many exegetical works.

¹⁴ According to Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, this even includes Surat Yusuf.

¹⁵ It has come down to us only in the edited version of Ibn Hisham (d. 833), which exclusively deals with Muhammad, but from numerous quotes in al-Tabari and others we know that the original included a section on creation and a narrative of the prophets. This version has been reconstructed by Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). On the redaction process see Rudolf Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif, und Geschichte. Die Muhammed-Biographie

Muhammad remained the primary axis of the corresponding parts of Muslim world histories throughout the Middle Ages.

Thus, in Qur'anic exegesis and in historiography, despite their different perspectives, there is a considerable overlap in terms of the material used. They also overlap with the fourth of the aforementioned genres, with books that specifically collected stories of the prophets, which are the primary focus of this article. The earliest collection known is that by Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 730), while others are known from the ninth and early tenth centuries.¹⁶ While these once popular collections have been absorbed into later literature and independent manuscripts have only recently been rediscovered, with the later works by al-Tha'labi (11th century) and al-Kisa'i (12th century) the genre became extremely popular. While al-Tha'labi's work is largely drawing on commentaries on the Qur'an, the attractiveness al-Kisa'i's book is based on its colorful legends full of fantastic detail.¹⁷ These have drawn the criticism of scholars trained in the sophisticated Islamic science of tradition (*hadith*), who accused the storytellers and written books of the same strand of conflating the Islamic tradition with obscure and apocryphal material from storytellers and Jewish sources. While the major plots agree with the data from the Qur'an, legends of the prophets can vary widely in details, or in the way they introduce secondary figures.¹⁸

Attempts to write stories of the prophets which conform to the rigorous standards of medieval Islamic scholarship were never able to compete with the "popular" brand. It was primarily al-Tha'labi and al-Kisa'i which became the basis for the proliferation of stories of the prophets outside of the Arabic-speaking world. Numerous works are known from Persian literature, among them an illustrated set dating

des Ibn Ishāq," in *Oriens* 18–19 (1965–66), 33–91. I continue to use the common term salvation history in spite of some reservations. Election history or revelation history would be preferable.

¹⁶ Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 138–146.

¹⁷ Al-Tha'labi, too, did "sink to the level of a popular book" (Nagel, *Qisas*, 80). While this book was printed many times, al-Kisa'i's work was disseminated in many different manuscript versions (Pauliny, *Kisa'i's Werk*).

¹⁸ The giant Og son of Anak, whose life intersects with that of many prophets, is a case in point, cf. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'i, *Tales of the Prophets (Qışaş al-anbiyā')*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (Chicago: KAZI, 1997), 251–253, and Nosiruddin Burhonuddin Rabghuzi, *The Stories of the Prophets: Qışaş al-anbiyā'. An Eastern Turkish Version*; eds. H.E. Boeschoten, M. Vandamme and S. Tezcan (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1995), vol. 2 (translation), 69–70.

from 16th-century Bagdad.¹⁹ Several works of different degrees of dependence on al-Tha'labi and al-Kisa'i are known from Turkish literature. The compilation of Rabghuzi, a Central Asian scholar of the early 14th century, similarly is considered the most widely read book in Eastern Turkic. Stories of the prophets have found their way into the popular literature anywhere in the Islamic world; prophets have become part of the Islamic heroic lore across the world.²⁰

The success of these stories has yet to be fully explained: Was it really just that the preachers "profaned religious subjects by using them for the entertainment and amusement of their audiences", trying to "impress the uneducated populace with piquant etymologies and other charlatanisms"?²¹ Modern scholars have focused on the function of the "Stories of the Prophets" in sermons, but in my opinion seem to overlook that there is no reason to limit sermons to examples from the prophets. Moreover, even if the extant stories originated from popular preaching that doesn't mean that their function had to remain restricted to 'exempla'.²² Exempla collections would be expected to be thematic or simply additive, so that the thematic range and the chronological structure of the "Stories of the Prophets" are not accounted for in this explanation.

In this article I suggest a different interpretation of their function in Islamic culture: I argue that the "Stories of the Prophets" function as Islamic myths. More precisely, they constitute nothing less than a translation of the scripture of Islam, the Qur'an, into the symbolic language

¹⁹ C. A. Storey, *Persidskaia literatura: bio-bibliograficheskiĭ obzor*, perevël s angliĭskogo, pererabotal i dopolnil Yu. È. Bregel' (Moskva: [Nauka], Glav. ped. Vostochnoi lit-ry, 1972), 510ff., Rachel Milstein, Karin Rühdanz, Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qışaş al-anbiyā* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

²⁰ See the excerpts from Suaheli stories in Jan Knappert, *Myths and Legends of the Swahilis*. London: Heinemann, 1970; see also John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 94–103.

²¹ Ignaz Goldziher, quoted in Thackston, *Introduction to al-Kisa'i, Tales*, XIX; see also the judgments in Nagel, *Qisas* 122–130.

²² The connection has been made by Nagel, *Qisas*, and pursued by Marc Vandamme, "Rabghuzi's Qışaş al-anbiyā", Reconsidered in the Light of Western Medieval Studies: Narrationes Vel Exempla", in *De Turcicis Aliisque Rebus. Commentarii Henry Hofman dedicati* (Utrecht: Instituut voor Oosterse Talen en Culturen, 1992), 7–37, for Rabghuzi. Vandamme has already noticed a number of discrepancies to Christian texts which remain to be explained.

of myth, or into a form that is accessible to the mythical mind.²³ In this article I will substantiate this interpretation with examples from Turkic languages. I will leave it to further research if the same understanding applies to other languages as well.²⁴ On the other hand, there is no need to argue that every instance of text has to conform to this interpretation, as other factors, such as the entertaining character, might still apply as well.

Although Wansbrough had already stated more than two decades ago that “the motive of all salvation history is interpretation, and to that extent all salvation history is mythic,” the concept of myth has hardly gained a foothold in Islamic studies.²⁵ Generally not only Islam, but all monotheistic religions are deeply suspicious of myth.²⁶ At the outset of his reconstruction of pre-Islamic Arabian myth, Stetkevych (using a term by Northrop Frye) deplores how Arabia “has most stubbornly denied itself the acknowledgment of a ‘mythological conditioning’,” as the qur’anic “concrete, ahistorical, and anti-mythical doctrinal stance [...] relegated mythical materials to anecdotal and ‘catechistic’ functions”. On the other hand he also pointed to the ‘stories of the prophets’

²³ Translation is used here in the broadest sense, although the linguistic aspect is not absent either, since the preclassical Arabic of the Qur’an together with the dogma of its unattainable beauty and intranslatability has erected an additional barrier between the ordinary listener and the sacred text.

²⁴ Vandamme argues that linguistic distinctions do not make sense within the genre. The texts I have used are Rabghuzi’s *Qisas al-anbiya* from Central Asia (1310 CE); an anonymous Anatolian Turkish text of the 14th century CE, purporting to be a translation of an unidentified Arabic original (İsmet Cemiloğlu), 14. *Yüzyıla Ait Bir Kısas-i Enbiyâ Nüshası Üzerinde Sentaks İncelemesi* (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 1994); Cevdet Pasha’s *Qisas-i Enbiya*, a classic of the 19th century (Ahmed Cevdet, *Qışaş-ı Enbiyâ’ ve Tevârih-i khulefâ* [Istanbul: Dârü l-tibâ’atu l-‘Âmire, n.d.]). I have also consulted the relevant sections in Ramazanade Mehmed’s 16th century Ottoman Turkish world history (Ramazanzâde Mehmed Pasha, *Qışaş-i Enbiyâ ve Tevârih-i khulefâ*, Istanbul: Taḥḥâne-i ‘Âmire, 1279 H.), in Fuzuli’s 16th-century Shi’ite martyrology (Fuzûlî, *Ḥadiqat as-su’adâ* [Istanbul: İzzet Efendi, 1279 H.], and a 15th-century book of mystical instruction by Eshrefoghlu Rumi (Eşrefoğlu Rumi, *Müzekkî’ n-nüfûs*, edited by Abdullah Uçman [Istanbul: İnsan, [1995]]).

²⁵ John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu. Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁶ Martin Forward, “Islam”, in *Myth and History*, ed. Jean Holm with John Bowker (London/New York: Pinter, 1994), 90–118; Jan and Aleida Assmann, “Mythos”, in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, eds. Cancik, Hubert, Burkhard Gladigow, and Karl-Heinz Kohl (5 vols., Stuttgart; Berlin; Köln: W. Kohlhammer, 1988–2001), vol. 4, 179–200, see also Earle H. Waugh, “The Popular Muhammad. Models in the Interpretation of an Islamic Paradigm,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Arizona University Press, 1985), 48, who states that “Muslim religious sentiment has little official place for myth.”

as an example of how “the legendary, myth-forming potential of the many narrative incipencies in the Quran became a tempting, narratively expansive ground.”²⁷

Myth has been approached by theorists from many different disciplinary angles, and has shown each of them a different face.²⁸ Here I am primarily using a functional approach, which studies myths as binding memories, ‘applied narrations’ (Assmann/Assmann) which respond to certain societal needs and concerns about the experience of the world and the human condition. Myths provide explanations of phenomena of the real world by attributing to them significance within the framework of a larger order.²⁹ Etiological myths, which explain how these phenomena came into being, constitute a special case within this group. In terms of a functional concept of myth, this “interpretive” function can be distinguished from the “legitimizing” about which Malinowski said that they secured existence and order of a society by relating these to a highest value which is omnipresent and uncontested, i.e. sacred.

“Stories of the Prophet” do not form one coherent monothematic narrative. Instead, their characterization as myth is based on their function, on their treatment of a number of characteristic themes, and of equally characteristic patterns of thought. The themes are cosmogony, the rise of human civilization, and heroism. The most obvious patterns are narrativization, animation, and a concept of time that separates the *tempus illud* of the myth from chronological or historical time. These elements are coming to the fore to different degrees in different texts. However, it has to be assumed throughout that people might be familiar with more than one written text, in addition to a strong oral tradition.³⁰

²⁷ Stetkevych, *Muhammad*, 2–3. Rather than pursuing the remnants of mythological conditioning within Islam (the “narrative mythic debris associated with the Hebrew bible”, p. 10), Stetkevych’s book ventures to cross the barrier that separates Islam from ancient Arabia.

²⁸ Alan Robert Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). For a summary of the great “universal theories” of myth see also Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, *Myth: its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

²⁹ The general discussion, surveyed by Segal, *Theorizing*, if myth answers questions (Eliade), preempts questions (Assmann/Assmann), or rejects questions (Blumenberg) does not concern us here.

³⁰ An example is provided by a manuscript copy of Fuzuli’s *Hadiqat as-Su’ada*, which includes illustrations of episodes not included in the text. I am grateful to Robert Haug for drawing my attention to this work in the Special Collections in the Graduate Library of the University of Michigan.

Thus, it is the totality of the “Stories of the Prophets” rather than one individual text that fulfills the function I am arguing.

Since the generic title “Stories of the Prophets” suggests a beginning from Adam (the first prophet in Islam), it has often been overlooked that most of them actually begin with a creation account.³¹ Those relate the creation of the heaven and the earth, the angels and demons, animals and finally of man in terms clearly influenced by biblical notions. Often, however, the texts add characteristic Islamic elements, like a description of God’s throne, and the creation of the Tablet and the Stylus, and the origin of our physical world from one primordial substance. While God’s throne essentially stands for God’s omnipotence, and illustrates the insignificance of our physical world, the Tablet and the Stylus symbolize a central piece of Islamic dogma, predestination.³² Thus the cosmogonic accounts include symbols which express general ideas about the operation of the world. The theme then extends beyond the creation accounts proper; especially in Rabghuzi’s work, the life on the ark assumes the character of a second creation:

The filth of men and animals on the Ark multiplied. When it became unbearable, the command arrived: “Let Noah, peace be upon him, pat the elephant on its back.” When Noah did so, the elephant shook its tail and the pig appeared from its ass. The pig ate all the filth. As has been related, that is why pork is forbidden today.³³

Similar etiological stories explain why mosquitoes don’t have tongues, why snakes eat frogs, and why the cat makes such a noise when it desires its mate. The sons of Noah exemplify the diverse human races, Ham’s blackness being a punishment for his laughing at his father’s exposed privates. It is also characteristic that such stories can be largely unrelated to the theme of the narrative onto which they are grafted.

The development of human customs and institutions is another larger theme that is underpinning especially the story of the early prophets. Ramazanzade points out that marriage between siblings was allowed

³¹ Several early Arabic texts included in their titles expressions such as “Book of the Beginning.” Cf. Newby, *Making*.

³² The ‘well-preserved tablet’ is mentioned in Qur’an 85:22 as the heavenly original of the Qur’an, but has taken on a different meaning in creation narratives (A.J. Wensinck, “Lawḥ.” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2008). Brill Online. Univ. of Michigan-Ann Arbor. 22 August 2008 <http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0576>).

³³ Rabghuzi, *The Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 65.

until the time of Noah, while killing people was an 'evil innovation' from Cain, to whom Rabghuzi also attributes wine-drinking, worshipping idols, and making music, in short, "every sin in the world."³⁴ Ramazanzade imposes a pattern of human progress on the series of the prophets in several layers. One consists of the different types of buildings at the site of the Ka'ba, from a tent to a mud brick structure to a stone building. The second layer is the achievements of human civilization, as the texts relate at the time of which prophet mankind started to build houses and cities (Mihla'il), to extract metals from ore (Mihla'il), to write (Idris), to clip their fingernails and trim their beards (Ibrahim), or to ride horses (Ismail).³⁵ Thus the evolving human civilization forms a counterpoint to the other grand narrative that underlies the history of the prophets: the cyclical repetition of the offer of salvation through prophets sent by God. On the other hand, his civilizational progress is mirrored by an increasing alienation of most of mankind from the initial pure religion. Rather than one instance of original sin it is a protracted process that explains the division of mankind between believers and unbelievers, leading to warfare between a minority of believers and a majority of infidels as the permanent state of mankind. The duality between the Muslim community (*umma*) and the nations, thus is projected back into the earliest moments of human history, receiving the status of an inalterable fact.³⁶

Thirdly, the "Stories of the Prophets" provide heroic narratives, stories of outstanding individuals whose achievements in their struggles exceed the physical and psychological boundaries of the ordinary human. I have argued elsewhere that in a certain period Turkish literature typically cast all protagonists as heroic figures, be they saints, warriors, or the prophet Muhammad himself.³⁷ According to the pattern of the punishment story, the prophets prove themselves heroic in their endurance of hardship

³⁴ Rabghuzi, *The Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 43. Ramazanzade, *Qisas-i Enbiya*, 11. The term 'bad innovation' is a special theological term, contrasting with 'good innovation' (such as building hospices), while in principle tradition is always preferred over innovation.

³⁵ Ramazanzade, *Qisas-i Enbiya*, 13–22. More examples could be added. See especially the list of professions of prophets *ibid.*, 46–47.

³⁶ Legally speaking the distinction is between the abode of Islam and the abode of war. The primordial character begs the question if complete Islamic domination of the world as promoted by Jihadists today, was ever within the purview of the mythical mind.

³⁷ Gottfried Hagen, "Heroes and Saints in Ottoman Turkish Literature," in *Oriente Moderno*, special issue edited by Giovanni Canova, forthcoming.

and steadfastness in faith.³⁸ The adversities they suffer may be imposed by Satan, as in the case of Job, or by their hostile fellow countrymen. Suffering is the central theme of Shi'ite martyrology, which includes the pre-Islamic prophets.³⁹ On the other hand, military heroes and world conquerors, namely Alexander the Great, who is often counted among the prophets, are viewed with suspicion. Alexander and Solomon both are taught the transient character of worldly power.

All prophets emerge as victorious from conflict and hardship, although not by means of their own hands, but only with God's help. Time and again, the prophetic stories provide vivid examples of classical Islamic virtues like patience, trust in God, obedience to his commands (Isaac!), rejection of the world, and remembrance of the hereafter, just like the heroic tale in general functions to perpetuate the values and attitudes held by a society. However, the narrative that most closely resembles the Rankian heroic myth is the life of Muhammad himself. Given the fact that the revelation of the Qur'an began only late in Muhammad's life, it is remarkable how much his early biographer Ibn Ishaq (whom we have linked to the "stories of the prophets" before) has to say about his birth and childhood, with the portents announcing his birth, unusual pace of growth, supernatural strength at an early age, separation from his parents, exile in lowly circumstances, and more. These are reminiscent of Rank's notions of myth, but in the form they have come down to us are to be considered another example of "mythic debris" reused in the construction of the sectarian grand narrative of Islam.⁴⁰

Not even the love story that is part of so many heroic myths is missing. In fact, the tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Yusuf and Zulaikha) has become one of the favorite romantic epics in Islamic literatures.⁴¹ While

³⁸ The original function of the punishment story, to prove the truth of Islam, was largely obsolete after the initial victory.

³⁹ See Fuzuli, *Hadiqat*.

⁴⁰ See his work as discussed by Segal, *Theorizing*, 121–4. Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad; A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat rasūl Allāh* (Lahore, Karachi, Pakistan Branch, Oxford University Press [1967]), 3–103. See also Hagen, *Heroes and Saints* and id., "He never took the Path of Pastime and Play", *Scripta Ottomanica et Res Altaicae. Festschrift für Barbara Kellner-Heinkele zu ihrem 60. Geburtstag*, herausgegeben von Ingeborg Hauenschild, Claus Schöning und Peter Zieme (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 95–118. For the reading of the "Life of Muhammad" as a narrative of sectarianism see Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*.

⁴¹ Firestone, R. "Yūsuf b. Ya'kūb", J.T.P. de Bruijn and Barbara Flemming, "Yūsuf and Zulaykhā," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2008). Brill Online. Univ. of Michigan-Ann

the Qur'an is content with reuniting Joseph with his father, Rabghuzi adds a melodramatic section that tells how the widowed Zulaikha was stricken by poverty and blindness, but regained her eyesight and her beauty through her faith in Joseph with whom she was finally united in a happy marriage.⁴² Again, the narrative abounds with colorful details of deep symbolism grafted onto the main plot as a second layer of mythical tales.

Among the patterns of thought mentioned above as characteristic of myth narrativization hardly requires explanation. It is generally acknowledged that myth by definition is narrative, although not every narrative is a myth. In the "Stories of the Prophets", as we have seen, innumerable larger and smaller plots are told in several layers, but all of them are held together by their symbolic meaning.⁴³ "Stories of the Prophets" can encapsulate many different meanings for their respective audiences, and the same story often enough carries different sub-narratives for different messages. These messages are often specified in inserted sections, which may be introduced by "it has been related", just like a variant of a narrative, or elsewhere as a question-and-answer section, as a familiar form of Islamic catechetical writing. While such passages are found in every text they abound particularly in Rabghuzi's work, where the number of secondary episodes calling for interpretation is significantly higher than in any other text discussed here. Now, it can be argued that the existence of such "self-exegetic interjections" are incompatible with a truly narrative myth.⁴⁴ However, as long as one assumes that these interjections are secondary to the narrative it is still possible to maintain that the underlying narrative as such possess mythical character, while the exegetic sections are due to attempts of Islamic scholars to keep the flourishing narratives under control.

A specific aspect of narrativization is animation, the attribution of speech and intention to things perceived as purely material in everyday

Arbor. 22 August 2008 <http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1370>.

⁴² Rabghuzi, *Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 271–277.

⁴³ See Rabghuzi's discussion of the meaning of Qur'an 12/3 "the most beautiful of stories", (Rabghuzi, *Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 164), which indicates his awareness of the link between narrative quality and symbolic meaning. See also al-Tha'labi on the use of "Stories of the Prophets" as quoted in Thackston, *Introduction to al-Kisa'i, Tales*, XXI.

⁴⁴ Stetkevych, *Muhammad*, 11 on the surah of Joseph.

experience. In the “Stories of the Prophets” animals regularly speak, like the animals in the ark. Trees and rocks recognize the prophet Muhammad and greet him. The most moving part is a section in the creation account, when God sends the angel Gabriel down to earth to fetch a lump of clay for the creation of man. The earth, however, refuses, because it has learned that this clay will be used to make man, many of whose offspring will end up as sinners and will burn in hell-fire. It takes several attempts, until God sends down Azrael, the angel of death, who simply ignores the earth’s objections and takes lumps of earth from different places, which then account for the different races of mankind.⁴⁵

The central category which characterizes the “Stories of the Prophets” as myth is the concept of time. Paul Ricoeur and others have emphasized the essential difference of time, saying that myth takes place, in the famous Eliadian term, *in illo tempore*, while history ideally is chronologically related to the *hic et nunc*.⁴⁶ Stetkevych has identified the transition from the “Age of Ignorance”, Jahiliya, i.e. Arab paganism, to Islam as the threshold that separates the dark ages from the lucidity of the Islamic “here and now”, just as it separates the age of mythical thought from the plainness and rationalism of Islamic dogma. As far as the “Stories of the Prophets” are concerned, Islamic collective memory has placed the divide between the age described in myth and the own chronologically structured past at different stages. Interestingly, most Arabic “Stories of the Prophets” begin with creation like any other, but stop short of the life of Muhammad. This is not simply an issue of genre, saying that the biography of Muhammad was treated in a different type of text. While Ibn Ishaq’s “Life of Muhammad” had initially included creation and the pre-Muhammadan prophets his editor Ibn Hisham reduced it to only the life of Muhammad proper, severing it from Islamic revelation history, but connecting it explicitly to the concerns of the present.⁴⁷ From the point of view of Arab collective memory, the life of Muhammad is the beginning of an uninterrupted flow of historical events down to their own present. It has a brief pre-

⁴⁵ Al-Kisa’i, *Tales*, 22–23. The different races are explained differently in the story of Noah’s sons in another part of the tradition. Another famous example is the wolf who denies having eaten Joseph.

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Myth: Myth and History” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Second edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6372.

⁴⁷ See above.

history in the traditions about Muhammad's ancestors, while there is no attempt at closing the gap between these Arab ancestors and the last prophet before him, Jesus. Therefore, Arab myth begins with creation and ends with Jesus, while history starts with Muhammad.

"Stories of the Prophets" in other languages, however, are based on a different dichotomy of time. For an Anatolian or Central Asian Turk, the ethnic or tribal collective memory may reach back in time to a certain amount, but will always stay within the same cultural realm, which does not include Arabia and the origins of Islam.⁴⁸ The life of Muhammad is not part of this accumulated collective memory, but belongs to the same mythical sphere, to *tempus illud*, as the Islamic creation account and the series of prophets before him. As a result, non-Arab "Stories of the Prophets" regularly include the life of Muhammad as the last of the series or narrative cycles.⁴⁹ In both cases, historical dynamic is characteristic of the *tempus illud*, while experienced history is based on a continuous repetition of set patterns. The integration into one chronological time as achieved by world chronicles, on the other hand, indicates a whole different epistemology; arguably it overcomes mythical thought.

The introduction of Rabghuzi's work gives us a clue of the Sitz im Leben of the genre. According to the dedication, the book was written for a prince Toqbogha of Khwarizm, who had just recently converted to Islam. Rabghuzi's intention was to provide him with an authoritative account, purged of legendary exaggeration, for the purpose of comprehensive instruction.⁵⁰ Several passages show a particular interest in conversions, most obviously in the story of the conversion of 'Umar b. al-Khattab, the second successor (caliph) to Muhammad as the leader of the community of believers. 'Umar is characterized as an honest and fierce but somewhat naïve warrior, that is, a person Turkic audiences liked to identify with. Upon hearing a recitation of the

⁴⁸ Within that it may reach back to another type of myth, like the myth of Oghuz and the descent of the Turks from him.

⁴⁹ This holds true for the Turkish texts I am aware of (see the overview of unpublished manuscripts in Cemiloğlu, *Kıyas-ı Enbiyâ*, XIV–XVIII), as well as for the Persian (see the relevant section in Storey, *Persidskaia literatura*). The selections in Knappert, *Myths and Legends* suggest a similar situation in Swahili literature. Of course my observations are not exhaustive.

⁵⁰ Rabghuzi, *Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 8.

Qur'an, he turned from a vehement opponent to one of Islam's most heroic defenders.⁵¹

Several conversion stories are prominent in the anonymous "Stories of the Prophets" as well, which according to its date belongs to a period when Islamization of Anatolia was in full swing. Moreover, a host of similar texts was produced in the same period, while very little followed after the late 15th century.⁵²

Conversion being a complex social process influenced by many factors, it would be too simplistic to assume that "Stories of the Prophets" were used to convert people to Islam by convincing them of the veracity of its message.⁵³ It is more likely that once conversion had taken place, a need for basic instruction arose. Interestingly, the few old Turkish translations of the Qur'an came into being especially in this period of Islamization; once Islam had struck root it was usually taught in Arabic (although not necessarily understood).⁵⁴ However, from what has been said before it is not likely that a Turkic translation (or rather paraphrase) of the text of the Qur'an satisfied that need for instruction in the basic tenets of Islam, even less in the salvation history. Hence my argument that the "Stories of the Prophet" in fact supplanted the Qur'an in this process, that they were even more than "the main religious nourishment of many a medieval Muslim."⁵⁵

These stories provided a comprehensive collection of religious knowledge in narrative form: a cosmology, a history of the revelation, including a narrative framework of the revelation of the Qur'an itself, and numerous narrative episodes encapsulating the morals and behaviors endorsed by Islam, all in a language that was accessible to an audience that lacked Islamic instruction.⁵⁶ Authors of "Stories of the Prophet"

⁵¹ It gets an extraordinary amount of attention in Rabghuzi, *Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 554–561.

⁵² Cemiloğlu, *Kıyas-ı Enbiyâ*, XIV–XVIII. In a striking departure from Kisa'i, the anonymous Turkish author narrates at great length Abraham's search for a God, expanding on Qur'an 6:77–79.

⁵³ This is Vandamme's argument in "Rabghuzi's *Qışaş al-anbiyâ*", 32.

⁵⁴ The dogmatic ideal of the inimitability of the Qur'an certainly compounded this issue (G.E. von Grunebaum, "I'djâz" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2008). Brill Online. Univ. of Michigan–Ann Arbor. 22 August 2008 <http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-3484>).

⁵⁵ Boaz Shoshan, "High Culture and Popular Culture in Medieval Islam," in *Studia Islamica* 83 (1991), 85.

⁵⁶ I owe the idea of an instructional text in a local vernacular as taking the place of the Qur'an to Tijana Krstić's insightful dissertation. She suggested such a function for

made sure to integrate as many Qur'anic quotes as possible, often in Arabic only, in other cases with a Turkish paraphrase. Rabghuzi's use of Qur'anic quotes is quite sophisticated, as he first characterizes every prophet with a number of emblematic quotes from different surahs, before he weaves those pertaining to narrative parts into his story as a kind of skeleton. For the Anonymous Qur'anic quotes representing direct speech were the easiest to integrate. Elsewhere the Turkish narrative follows a phrase from the Qur'an like a piece of haggadic exegesis. The intensive use of these quotes certainly enhanced the impression for the reader that the text was reliable.⁵⁷

As a result it might be said that the "Stories of the Prophet" actually became for this newly converted community what the gospels are for Christianity: an account of how the message was brought, and the message itself.⁵⁸ The crucial point is that the "Stories of the Prophet" can "stand alone", whereas a direct translation of the Qur'an can not, because it needs exegesis. Of course, certain aspects of the Qur'an are entirely absent from the mythical rendering, in particular the numerous legal regulations which make the reading of the Medinan *surahs* so cumbersome. Arguably, a newly converted Turkic audience could easily dispense with those since their legal practice would either continue to be based on ethnic traditional law, or would begin to import Islamic law through a different venue.⁵⁹ The apocalyptic themes of the Qur'an are absent, too, although some manuscripts of Rabghuzi do end with a section on the end of time.⁶⁰

In lieu of a conclusion I will point out a theoretical consequence of my argument. Our discussion has focused strongly on texts commonly labeled as "popular", which usually implies an inclination to legendary

another text, a kind of versified catechism. It remains to be explored if several such replacements could exist side by side (Tijana Krstic, *Narrating Conversions to Islam: The Dialogue of Texts And Practices in Early Modern Ottoman Balkans*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2004).

⁵⁷ Vandamme's argument that the Qur'anic quotes meant to endorse the claim to factual veracity is somewhat misleading, since this veracity of the story as such was never to be questioned. Only certain details were subject to scholarly scrutiny.

⁵⁸ On this aspect of the difference between Qur'an and Gospel see F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991), 291–315.

⁵⁹ Translations of Islamic law books in local vernaculars, and in particular in verse, are another characteristic of the age of Islamization.

⁶⁰ Rabghuzi, *Stories of the Prophets*, vol. 2, 768–786.

expansion, lack of criticism and sophistication, eventually a strong component of orality, as well as association with a social class other than the elite. In connection with religion “popular” usually describes practices not approved by the scholarly elite. For the “Stories of the Prophets” Nagel, and after him Vandamme have adopted the term aristocratic as the opposite of “popular”. In other words, the term “popular” evokes a host of divergent dichotomies, which in most cases only selectively apply. Moreover, frequently both the elite and the wider population share cultural practices which have been labeled “popular”. Thus it has been shown to be inadequate for the description of cultural phenomena in their respective social setting.⁶¹ The notion of popular religion in particular remains questionable as a denomination of practices not sanctioned by scholarly consensus.⁶²

Thus it seems advisable to define in a specific context what makes a phenomenon part of “popular culture”: its social locale, its origin, its lack of an author (in the case of literature), its opposition to other practices. The “Stories of the Prophets” studied here offer one possible criterion out of several, which will be more specific and appropriate. They cannot be considered “popular” in opposition to “learned culture” as several of them betray a background of Islamic scholarship. Nor are they exclusively “popular” in the social sense, as even the “popular” ones are often just as widely read and proliferated among the elite as among the “uneducated populace.” Rather, we can consider them popular exactly to the degree that they speak the symbolic, assertive, narrative language of myth, instead of the argumentative, philosophical language of dogma. On the other hand, the popularity of a text largely stripped of its mythical attributes, and purporting to deliver bare historical fact, such as Ahmed Cevdet’s *Qisas* in the late 19th century, clearly indicates that mythical thought, too, has its historical conjunctures and needs to be studied as a historical phenomenon.

⁶¹ The most thorough study is Shoshan, *High Culture*. See also id., *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶² In addition to Shoshan’s work see Jacques Waardenburg, “Official and Popular Religion as a Problem in Islamic Studies,” in *Official and Popular Religion. Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*, eds. Pieter Hendrik Vrijhof and Jacques Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), whose catalog of popular phenomena in Islam comprises about every form of living religion. The “two-tiered model” of the popular as mainly a failure to be something else, i.e. elite-level, has been abandoned in Western and medieval studies since Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

THE RIGHT TO WRITE:
POWER, IRONY, AND IDENTITY IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

J'annine Jobling and Alan Roughley

The book of Esther has enjoyed considerable scholarly attention in recent years.¹ It has a controversial history as canon literature; Martin Luther, for example, expressed a wish that this book did not exist—for it “has too many heathen unnaturalities.”² The eighteenth-century critic Semler held that it was pure imagination, establishing nothing but the pride and arrogance of the Jews. Indeed, there are stories of first-century rabbinic debate protesting that the inclusion of Esther in the canon would awaken animosity between Jews and “the nations.” And certainly, the violence in chapter 8, when the Jewish people defeat and exterminate those who would have harmed them, has caused much uneasiness in interpreters. By contrast, Maimonides held that the book was dictated by the Holy Spirit.

Esther has other distinguishing qualities. It is the only canonical text of the Hebrew Bible not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is one of only two biblical books that never mentions God (the other is the Song of Songs). This absence of the holy patriarchal name is reflected within the text by King Ahasuerus's continual abdication of his own power and authority as he delegates it to his courtiers and scribes, to Haman and to Mordecai. This double absence of the name of God and the power of the king is in effect a double absence of the name of the father, which creates a vacuum around which the carnivalesque events—Luther's “heathen unnaturalities”—of the narrative are staged.

In genre, it is variously understood as festival legend (it recounts the establishment of the Jewish festival of Purim), novella, comedic

¹ The text's dating is uncertain, but is usually ascribed to some time between the late fifth century BCE and the second. Whenever written, however, it is generally understood to be a diasporic text emanating from the Persian empire. Besides the Masoretic Text (MT) in Hebrew, there are six Additions to the text made in the Greek Septuagint, and a further Greek variant known as the A-text. This chapter deals only with the MT version.

² Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1981 [1566]), XXIV.

farce and wisdom literature. We will supplement such readings with our investigation of the carnival excess which pervades a significant part of its narrative.

In this chapter, we will explore these carnivalesque elements of the book of Esther from a feminist perspective, utilizing both structuralist and post-structuralist methodologies. Our purpose is to draw out and mark the networks of power which constitute the intertextual structures in which identity and authority are constructed and reconstructed within the text. The consideration of a single text such as the book of Esther as an intertextual site is justified by reading the contesting economies of power circulating within the same text as Kristevan 'systems of signs' which are transposed into each other and "accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position."³ Essentially, we read Esther as carnivalesque satire in which concepts of patriarchy are treated ironically, and this reading allows us both to consider the importance of irony in the narrative, and to examine the pivotal narrative moments in Esther's contribution to Ahasuerus's elevation of Mordecai and to the Jews' gaining of "the upper hand over those who hated them" (9:1). One key aspect of this, we suggest, is the power or 'right' to write: identity is ironically stabilized as authoritative through access to the written word, which in the book of Esther both produces and guarantees 'truth'.

Gender is a facet of identity and of positioning in the social symbolic order that has come to much greater prominence in recent decades. Feminist literature on Esther is, however, divided. Vashti is almost universally celebrated as an example of a strong woman who dared to flout the patriarchal system and stand up for her own dignity. Esther, on the other hand, is variously seen as a feminist icon, triumphing over patriarchal structures through her astute navigation of them, or as a patriarchal dupe—attaining her own ends, yes, but only through co-optation into the role of submissive female. Esther Fuchs and Alice Laffey are well-known representatives of the latter school of thought. As Laffey puts it:

In contrast to Vashti, who refused to be men's sexual object and her husband's toy, Esther is the stereotypical woman in a man's world. She

³ Léon Roudiez, introduction to *Desire in Language*, by Julia Kristeva, ed. Léon Roudiez, trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 16.

wins favor by the physical beauty of her appearance, and then by her ability to satisfy sexually.... When feminists compare the two women, they extol Vashti, though they are not at all surprised that the literature, produced as it was in a patriarchal culture, honors Esther and relegates Vashti to oblivion.⁴

Fuchs goes even further; it has long vexed and perplexed interpreters that God makes no appearance in the MT version of Esther. A whole range of reasons are advanced to explain this, but Fuchs gives a distinctly feminist twist to the debate. She claims that the absence of the name of God is, in fact, expressive of a "comprehensive biblical policy which allows women characters to hold direct discourse with God (or his agent) only in a 'procreative' context."⁵ Furthermore, the scroll of Esther reinforces a patriarchal ideology which allows women to get their own way only through deception. Thus Esther is doubly hazardous as a role-model for women: she, herself, models complicity with patriarchal ideology—and yet, even in this most virtuous of roles, is distanced from God.

By contrast, commentators such as Michael V. Fox⁶ and Sidnie Ann White⁷ offer far more positive readings of the image presented by Esther, as a structurally disadvantaged individual exploiting the resources available to her. Fox, for example, argues that

it teaches that even a stereotypical woman in a world of laughably stereotypical males is capable of facing the ultimate national crisis and diverting the royal power to her own ends.⁸

However, it could be argued that to see Esther as either a 'proto'-feminist or as an 'anti'-feminist is to miss the nuances of the text as satire on power and identity. Here is a woman, submissive and respectful, who engineers the downfall of her enemy and is herself thus elevated in power. Here is a Jew, Mordecai, whose refusal to submit to Haman and bow before him brought potential disaster upon his people, but who ultimately attained to "high honour" (10:2). Here is a king, who

⁴ Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 216.

⁵ Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 79.

⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

⁷ Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 161–177.

⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 207.

abdicated his responsibilities at every opportunity, but is accounted “acts of power and might” (10:2). And here is Haman, raised high indeed—50 cubits high on the stake he had erected for the hanging of Mordecai.

Beal makes a strong case for moving away from examining the book of Esther through the hermeneutic lens of role-model discernment. He writes:

Because scholarship has tended to approach the book of Esther as moral literature, focusing on evaluation of its images of Jew and woman as models, there has been only accidental attention to the problematics of either ethnic or gender identity, let alone to the problematic convergences of the two. Yet the book of Esther is *riddled* with such convergences, ambivalences, and ambiguities....one must ask whether the book of Esther is less about the definition and fixation of identity and more about its problematization.⁹

He argues, therefore, that the most productive way of approaching this text is through consideration of its *displacements* of identity and its deconstructions of stability. For him, his work on Esther must

begin in dislocation, and can advance in only by traversing thresholds, by an exegesis that traces hauntings to deeper and deeper levels of dislocation. Esther is a writing in diaspora, about identity in dispersion and under threat. It plays between annihilation and Purimfest, between desert and carnival.¹⁰

And indeed, we can see various networks of power and identity at play in the intertextual networks of the book of Esther. There are politics of gender, of ethnicity, of authority, of honour, and of pleasure. Stalking this nexus of power plays is the politics of death. This is the ghost at the seemingly endless series of feasts. Readings which emphasize the unsettling of identity in the networks of power in Esther are especially ironic if one agrees with Niditch that “the book of Esther is about the status quo, maintenance of it, and finding a proper place within it”;¹¹ in true deconstructive style, the fixing of the status quo is only achieved by revealing its very precariousness and fragility. Nowhere in the book

⁹ Timothy Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 33.

of Esther is this more evident than in the issue of identity, whether expressed in gendered, functional or ethnic terms.

The Jews are represented in the person of Mordecai as initially portrayed to us (2:6), and then described as dispersed across the land; in Haman's words, they are a "certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples" (3:8). Esther, a female representative of Jewish identity and patriarchy who represents the avunculate structure of her own family, has herself been instructed by Mordecai actually to hide her Jewish identity, and has married a Gentile. In representing her father's house she must do so indirectly, for her father, like the God of his people, is another absent father in the text. She can only represent this absent father by representing her father's male representative, his nephew Mordecai, who "had a foster-child Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, who had neither father nor mother" (2:7). Esther is a supplement or model twice removed from the original of her own father.¹²

It is ironic, given his instructions to Esther, when Mordecai himself 'comes out' and asserts his Jewishness as reason for his refusal to bow before Haman. Thereafter the Jews act in community—first in mourning, as a result of Haman's edict against them; then in celebration, once Mordecai's edict has been circulated; thereafter, in execution, as they kill those who would stand against them on the thirteen and fourteenth of Adar; and finally in festival, both at the conclusion of the book of Esther and in perpetuity in collective remembrance of it through the

¹² Jacques Derrida explores the role of substitute for an 'original' model throughout much of his work. He considers the relationships between the substitute and the so-called original in terms of the relationship between the spoken word and the thought or idea which it represents and the written word as a supplemental substitute for the spoken word. In *Of Grammatology*, he explores "culture or cultivation" as a supplement to nature and childhood as necessary for the appearance of the supplement in Nature (*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976], 146–147). In *Dissemination* he maps out the relationships between a model and its representation in terms of the Platonic concept of mimesis (see, for example, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press], 63–171). We are indebted to his concepts of the supplement and the imitative representation of a model by its substitute for our view of Haman, Mordecai and Ahasuerus's courtiers as substitutes for the king and of Esther as a representative of her family and people. The authority to write, or to sign decrees and edicts in the king's name, is another area where Derrida's writings can offer insights into the relationships of substitution and representation. For Derrida, the supplement or imitation can be dangerous in threatening the original by taking its place and replacing it.

feast of Purim. Clines asserts, however, that what is celebrated "is a deliverance achieved through denying one's Jewishness."¹³ Esther's hiding of her Jewishness puts her in a position from which, ironically enough, she can act to save her people; Mordecai's revelation of his Jewishness produces another ironic result which is one he would not have wished: the edict of genocide against the Jews. Furthermore, the accession of Mordecai and Esther to the 'right to write' royal decrees represents, according to Clines, a crisis in Jewish identity—an assimilation of Jewishness into Persian bureaucracy, whereby truth is what is recorded in Persian written records.¹⁴

Thus, we can already see that gender and ethnicity are key structuring elements in the presentation of identity in the book of Esther. A structuralist analysis reveals several formal patterns upon which we will base our exploration of these themes of power, gender and the role of irony in the book of Esther. The obvious structural pattern that emerges from an heuristic reading of the text is the tripartite narrative structure consisting of the prologue recounting Vashti's banishment from the court of King Ahasuerus and the subsequent coronation of Esther as Ahasuerus's queen (1:1–2:23); Haman's plotting against Mordecai and the Jews (3:1–5:14); and Mordecai's triumph after the failure of Haman's plot (6:1–10:3). The insomnia of the king recounted at 6:1 is widely acknowledged to be the pivotal point of the narrative. Such a structuralist analysis of the narrative also reveals a chiastic pattern;¹⁵ Haman's fall and Mordecai's rise, and the inversion of the plot-fate of the Jewish people, provide us with simultaneous narrative movements that can be graphically represented by the figure or letter X in the same way as the poetic trope of chiasmus.

The chiastic narrative conversion of the book of Esther structures the narrative from Haman's promotion and Mordecai's refusal to "bow down to him or do obeisance" (3:2–3), through to the banquet where Esther petitions King Ahasuerus that her "own life and the lives of [her] people be saved" (7:3) and reveals Haman's plot to kill Mordecai and

¹³ David Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text," in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967–1998*, Volume 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 3–22, <http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern1/Esther.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Yehuda T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 50–117.

his people, and then to the final triumph of Mordecai when Haman is hoist with his own petard and “hanged on the gallows that he himself had prepared for Mordecai” (7:10). This chiasmic structure could be said to reinforce the notion that the first section, which relates Vashti’s refusal to obey Ahasuerus’s command to appear before him and “the people and the officers,” is a sort of prologue that is not as important as the following two sections. Beal notes that this prologue, or the first of the three sections, is often taken as an interesting but largely irrelevant account of Vashti’s fate that does little more than set up a ‘lack’ which provides a vacuum for Esther to step into.¹⁶

From a feminist post-structuralist reading, the prologue is much more important. It immediately places the king *mise-en-scène* within one of the many banquets and sites of revelry which punctuate the narrative and provide an alternative, carnivalesque structure to the chiasmic narrative pattern. When King Ahasuerus is drunk, or “merry with wine” (1:10), he orders the “seven eunuchs who were in attendance on the king’s person, to bring Queen Vashti before him wearing her royal crown” (1:11). Where a structuralist analysis might focus on this command as a narrative event initiating the subsequent narrative sequences of Vashti’s refusal to obey and her consequent banishment, a feminist reading can explore Ahasuerus’s order as an expression of his desire for Vashti to occupy the position of the *objet a* for his desire. He desires Vashti to occupy the position of an object within his own gaze, and, more perversely, to occupy this position in the gaze of “the people” and presumably male “officers” who are attending the banquet. Ahasuerus’s intoxication suggests that sexual desire is the primary force behind his command and that the voyeuristic desire to watch Vashti as the object of the gaze of the other males is at work in his desire for her “to display her beauty to the people and the officers” (1:11).

Furthermore, the prologue hyperbolically introduces a theme that will, we suggest, be of considerable importance in all that follows. Who is master in the house of the king? Vashti is banished for her refusal to comply with the king’s command; his advisers turn this into an international incident from which women at large will learn contempt for their husbands. Let the edict go forth, then, throughout Persia and Media: let Vashti be repudiated, and every man be master in his own household (1:19–22). A further question raised, and closely related to the first, is, who will afford the king the most pleasure? For Vashti’s place

¹⁶ Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 30–32.

will be given to one "more pleasing" than she (1:19); and, as we shall see in what follows, to please the king and satisfy *his* desires is the surest way to attain one's own.

Beal applies Derrida's concepts of the 'frame' and the preface to the story of Vashti; the boundary marking the supposedly peripheral off from the 'main event' is seen to be unstable. This prologue story is never actually over. It shadows the rest of the text. In the very erasure of Vashti, she remains: an absent presence, or a present absence. Such, in fact, is Vashti's role all along. She is absent. It is her very refusal to be present that is problematic about her. Vashti, says Beal, has been literally written out, by decree; she has been 'ex-scribed,' and the 'proper' roles of women have been 're-inscribed.' Furthermore:

Exscription serves to mark territory by naming that which belongs outside it; yet precisely in this process of marking off for oblivion, Vashti and her refusal are also indelibly *written into* the story in a way that will be difficult to forget.¹⁷

Certainly, the king cannot forget. It is his memory of Vashti which prompts his servants to proffer further advice: this time, to launch a search for a replacement from the beautiful young virgins of all the provinces of the kingdom. And thus, we arrive at Esther. Her introduction into the story presents her as a mirror to Vashti—the same phrase is applied to both; they are "pleasing to look at" (1:11; 2:7). Esther, however, we also learn, is the adopted daughter of her cousin Mordecai, a Jew, a Benjamite and an exile. Esther's doubled identity is emphasized by her presentation with two names—Hadassah and Esther. And what is more, the name 'Esther' rendered in Hebrew gives us the meaning 'I am hiding.' This is precisely the case; Esther is hiding in plain sight, for, as already noted, Mordecai has instructed her not to reveal her Jewish identity to the king.

In the same way as Esther doubles with Vashti, Mordecai finds his counterpart in Haman. The enmity between the two is given an ethnic dimension with the information that Haman is an Agagite; for Agag was king of Amalek, the enemy of Israel. As we hear in Exodus 17:16, "the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." Moreover, it is Saul who fought Agag in 1 Samuel 15, and we have already been told that Mordecai is a descendant of Saul. The rivalry between the two also has a personal aspect; Mordecai, through the

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

agency of Esther, has revealed plans of an assassination plot against the king; yet, "after these things" (3:1), it is Haman who is raised to high office. Mordecai is passed over. Thereafter, Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman, precipitating Haman's determination to exterminate the Jewish people. Just as the king's wrath with Vashti provoked an edict directed against all women, so does Haman's anger with Mordecai lead to an edict directed against all the Jews.

In a post-structuralist reading the king occupies an extremely ambivalent and unstable position. As king, he should be the centre of power, but he continually abdicates his authoritative role by delegating his power to others. His power is the absent centre of a text, and this absence mirrors the absence of the name of God in the narrative. If he can be seen as a mirror of anything in the text it is as the mirror of this theological absence. In terms of the text's carnivalesque play, Ahasuerus's continual delegation of his power to others can be read as the inversion of power and authority that is essential in the structure of the carnival.

The king's position is so unstable that it can be read in the context of the chaos that characterizes the carnival. His reign is one of a paradoxically impotent power. Ahasuerus is sexually potent but politically impotent. He spends the four years between banishing Vashti and giving her crown to Esther in trying the "beautiful young virgins" (2:3) to find "the one who is most acceptable" (2:4). Yet when Vashti makes him "hot with anger" (1:12), he lacks even the most basic political or juridical knowledge of what to do and has to confer with "his wise men versed in misdemeanours" (1:13). He is the enemy of the Jewish people: he carelessly approves Haman's plans of genocide without even bothering to enquire about the identity of the race he has just agreed to exterminate. Paradoxically, he is also the saviour of the Jewish people: he permits Esther and Mordecai to set in motion the reversal that leads to a massacre of the Persians instead of the Jews. This structural instability in the position of the king reinforces his presentation as foolish, indecisive and prey to the manipulations of others. Not once does the king refuse a request made to him. Furthermore, he could also be said to model the ambiguity of the Persian government more broadly with respect to the Jewish people, which, Clines notes, "is experienced by the Jews both as threat and as protection—an experience consequently inscribed in the book."¹⁸

¹⁸ Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right."

At last, then, after her twelve months of beauty treatment, Esther appears before the king (2:15), wins his favour and approval, and is made queen “instead of Vashti” (2:18). As with all the characters in this narrative, and typical of biblical prose, there is no physical description of her apart from such generalized statements as “she was indeed a beautiful woman” (1:11–12). Aside from this statement about the beauty attributed to Vashti and Esther, identity is created by functional roles and psychological traits rather than physical description. By comparing their actions, we can discern that Esther is, arguably, wiser than Vashti in gaining power for herself and Mordecai; and from a feminist, post-structuralist perspective, Esther’s wisdom can be discerned in the ways that she uses the network of patriarchal authority which stems from the circulation of Ahasuerus’s desire throughout the structures of the court. Instead of having to directly refuse the commands of Ahasuerus as Vashti does, Esther adopts the positions of a simulacrum or what Derrida terms a “dangerous supplement.”¹⁹ She is a supplement to the king, who can occupy a double position in the network of his patriarchal authority and male desire in order to direct and regulate its operations. Esther regulates the king’s desire by directing the delegation of his power and authority away from Haman and towards Mordecai. Vashti’s refusal of the king’s command to appear before him is a double refusal in so far as she also disobeys the seven eunuchs who convey Ahasuerus’s order to her. Esther avoids having to demonstrate such direct disobedience by taking advantage of the “special favour” (2:9) that the king’s eunuch, Hegai, shows to her. Each of the girls who appear before the king is “allowed to take with her whatever she asked, when she went from the women’s quarters to the king’s palace” (2:13–14).

What Esther wants is knowledge of what the king wants. She desires to know his desire, and, paradoxically, she gains access to knowledge of the king’s desire by listening to the knowledge that Hegai has. She seeks and finds knowledge of male potency from a figure of impotence. When she is summoned before Ahasuerus, Esther takes advantage of Hegai’s knowledge in order to appear as Hegai knows the king would like her to appear:

When the turn came for Esther, daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai her adoptive father, to go to the king, she asked for nothing to take with her except what was advised by Hegai, the king’s eunuch in charge of the women. (2:15)

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141.

In so far as she heeds Hegai's advice, Esther is able to appear before the king armed with Hegai's knowledge. She thus functions as a simulacrum of Hegai, who supplements her knowledge with his and who can operate in the position of the eunuch by being metaphorically dressed in his knowledge and literally dressed and made up in a way that he knows the king will like. The relationship between Esther and Hegai is a unique gender relationship: the female Esther seeks advice on the nature of Ahasuerus's male desire from the eunuch, Hegai, and, as a eunuch, Hegai can move between the knowledge of his king's desire and the female desire of the king's women of whom he is in charge. Hegai moves between male and female desire and has access to both. He is in a unique double position and can traverse the networks of both male and female desire. Esther's wisdom and skills for self-survival and advancement enable her to take advantage of Hegai's access to a unique knowledge of both female and male desire.

The chiasmic pattern of the narrative which traces the fall of Haman and his house and the simultaneous rise in the fortunes of Mordecai and his people is punctuated by the transfer of the talismanic signet ring which Ahasuerus gives first to Haman (3:10) and subsequently to Mordecai: "Then the king took off his signet-ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai" (8:2). This double giving of the signet ring reinforces the irony of Ahasuerus's edict that "each man might be master in his own house" (1:22): Ahasuerus is very willing to delegate his own power and transfer the mastery of his own house to the position of another. This delegation is closely bound up with writing, for the signet ring is used to seal orders and proclamations "written in the name of the king" (8:8). The ring simultaneously serves several functions: it supplements and guarantees authority and authenticity and it serves as a simulacrum or model that can replace and threaten the authority that it is supposed to represent and guarantee.

This signet ring is also tied up with a potential textual aporia, or knot, created around the king's edicts, and this aporia creates a textual inconsistency that revolves around writing that is done in the king's name and which operates at the crux of the narrative conversion in which Mordecai replaces Haman as the head of the king's officers. When Haman hatches his plot to kill the Jews, he asks Ahasuerus that "an order be made in writing for their destruction" (3:9). In exchange for this order, Haman promises to "pay ten thousand talents of silver to [the king's] officials to be deposited in the royal treasury" (3:9-10). It is at this point in the narrative where Haman attempts to exchange money for the condemnation of the Jews that Ahasuerus delegates his authority

to Haman: "So the king took the signet-ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammendatha and the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (3:10–11). This delegation is unlimited because Ahasuerus gives full reign to Haman's desire for the genocide of the Jews. Returning the money to Haman, the king declares: "The money and the people are yours; deal with them as you wish" (3:11). In other words, Haman can speak with the voice of the king and his will can operate in the place of the king's will. Haman thus becomes a substitute for the king, who can speak and write as if he were Ahasuerus.

At this point in the narrative, Haman's desire becomes synonymous with the king's, and Haman has the authority to issue a writ with

orders to destroy, slay, and exterminate all Jews, young and old, women and children in one day, the thirteenth day of the of the twelfth month, the month of Adar and to plunder their possessions. (3:13–14)

The orders are written "in accordance with Haman's instructions" (3:12), but they are in effect the king's orders because the document is "drawn up in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet" (3:12). The aporia is created in part by the sealing of the document by the king's ring. As we discover when the king gives the ring to Mordecai, orders "written in the name of the king and sealed with the royal signet cannot be revoked" (8:8).

It is Esther who has the power and ability to initiate the narrative sequence that unties this knot and dissolves the aporia. She gains this power and authority by assuming a subservient position in front of Ahasuerus, falling at his feet in tears and pleading with him to avert the calamity planned by Haman the Agagite and to frustrate his plot against the Jews (8:3). At this point in the narrative Esther is the queen, and she knows how to use Ahasuerus's power to gain the objects of her own desire. In a symbolic exchange of phallic and patriarchal power, "The king stretched out the golden sceptre to Esther, and she rose and stood before the king" (8:4–5). Esther literally gains an equal standing with the king as she rises and stands before him, and she makes a first attempt to solve the problem of the orders "written in the name of the king and sealed with the royal signet [that] cannot be revoked." Her solution is not to try and revoke the irrevocable but to recall the letters in which the orders that cannot be revoked are written. She does not state her solution directly but prefaces it with a tripartite, conditional apologia which acknowledges that it is only the king's authority and approval that can solve the problem:

if I have found favour with you, and if the proposal seems right to your majesty and I have won your approval, let a writ be issued to recall the letters which Haman son of Hammendatha the Agagite wrote in pursuance of his plan to destroy the Jews in all the royal provinces. (8:5–6)

Esther renders unto Ahasuerus what belongs to Ahasuerus and saves her people in so doing.

Of course, we are only part-way towards plot resolution. As we have already been informed, written laws cannot be revoked. What is said is said. Thus, the denunciation and execution of Haman resolves only one aspect of tension. The law decreeing the Jews' destruction still stands. How is the irrevocable to be revoked? And this time it is Mordecai who unravels the aporia. What is written cannot be unwritten—but it can be *overwritten* or supplemented with another edict. Characteristically, the king has abdicated responsibility for the genocide he has initiated through Haman. He has handed over the task of solving his problems to Mordecai and Esther, who may write as they please with regard to the Jews, backed up by the authority of the royal signet ring (8:8). So yet another edict is issued, but this time “according to all that Mordecai commanded” (8.9). This adds a supplement to the prior law—the Jews are legally enfranchized to defend themselves. This marks not only the resolution of a temporary but horrific complication (genocide), but also a far more fundamental shift in the economy of power. Thereafter the king seems to have handed over unlimited power to Esther and, through her, to Mordecai. “Whatever more you seek,” he tells her, “shall be done” (9:12). There follows another day of massacre, and then a positive flurry of letters as the festival of Purim is inaugurated with commemorative days of feasting and gladness (10:22).

We have noted that the transfer of the signet ring punctuates the narrative and marks the shifting structures of power. The same is true of banquets, as Clines notes in his semantic analysis.²⁰ The short text of Esther includes nine drinking parties, all of which create and sustain the carnivalesque nature of the narrative. The king's extended feasting opens the book; we have already had two banquets before we reach the end of the initial five verses. These are very clearly showcases for royal glory and munificence. The third banquet is Vashti's—for women, and “in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus” (1:9). This third banquet literally positions Vashti and the women “in the royal apartments

²⁰ Clines, “Reading Esther from Left to Right.”

of King Ahasuerus" and this, like Ahasuerus's voluntary delegation of his power to the positions of the others in his court, contributes to the carnivalesque inversion or limitation of his authority.

Vashti's refusal to present herself at the king's feast is brought to narrative resolution through the throwing of yet another party for his officials and servants to celebrate the selection of Esther as queen—and this one was "Esther's banquet" (2:18). Again, a carnivalesque inversion occurs as the banquet is given the proper name of the female rather than the male proper name of the king. One may speculate that we see here Esther proffering that which Vashti refused, through her presence at the king's feast in her honour. At the fifth banquet, Haman and the king "sat down to drink," while the city of Susa is thrown into confusion by the edict to kill, to destroy and to annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth day of Adar (3:15). This is also the point at which fasting is inserted into the text, as the Jews follow Esther's command and partake of no food or water for three days or nights (4:16). The next two banquets are thrown by Esther herself, for Haman and the king, and mark the beginning of narrative inversion. Now we see the pendulum of power beginning to swing. The eighth and ninth banquets are thrown by the Jews to celebrate Mordecai's edict (8:17) and the slaughter of their enemies (9:17–19). Thus, as Clines points out, the banquets track "the movement of power from Persians to Jews."²¹

Jopie Siebert-Hommes undertakes a sustained analysis of clothing and ornamentation to show how this too structurally encodes the shifts of power and influence in the text.²² The most obvious example is in Mordecai, who goes from mourning to glory, from sackcloth (4:1) to great golden crown and fine linen robes (8:15). The pivotal chapter, 6, has the carnivalesque dressing-up of Mordecai in royal style—by Haman, who, in a humorously ironic misunderstanding, thought it was he and not Mordecai whom the king wished to honour. Haman thinks he is arranging this parade of the king's favour on his own behalf! What this also reveals is Haman's desires: he wants to be a simulacrum of the king. This is a role ultimately bestowed, instead, on his greatest rival. Furthermore, the 'royal crown' (*koetoer malkut*) appears in three places only—on the heads of Vashti, Esther, and the horse Haman

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jopie Siebert-Hommes, Jopie. "On the third day Esther put on her queen's robes' (Esther 5:1): The Symbolic Function of Clothing in the Book of Esther," *Lectio difficilior* 1/2002, http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02_1/siebert.pdf.

fantasizes about riding while dressed in the king's clothes. This leads Siebert-Hommes to conclude:

The fact that Haman wishes the *queen's crown* on the head of the horse on which he will ride creates the impression that Haman in his fantasy is not so much thinking of a royal horse from the court-stables but rather of having the *queen* for one night...!²³

Interestingly, Siebert-Hommes points out that is *only* Mordecai about whom we learn actual details of clothing. Vashti, Esther, Haman and Ahasuerus himself are never 'dressed' by the text (leading, indeed, some commentators to infer that Vashti was commanded to present herself before the king naked but for her crown in 1:11). We have already seen, however, that Ahasuerus's signet ring plays a weighty symbolic role. For Vashti and Esther, it is the passing of the 'royal crown' (*koetoer malkut*), which doubles the passing of the signet ring, from one to the other which is significant. And what is more, Esther wears a 'royal robe' when she makes her unsolicited entrance into the presence of the king (5:1–5). A more literal rendering of the Hebrew there would be that Esther has 'put on the kingship' (*wattilbash malkut*); this appropriately marks Esther's emergence into agency and authority.²⁴

This text is marked by an abundance of sensual excess which sustains its carnivalesque nature: it is an economy of pleasure beneath which banishment, fasting and annihilation lurk and finally emerge into the violent reversal of a bloody massacre. Esther and Mordecai traverse these murky depths, re-establish pleasure (feasting), and fix their identities as simulacra of the king; they have gained the right to write. But power continues to flow, and identities continue to be subverted. We can see this if we trace the intertwining of issues of gender and ethnicity through to the conclusion of the book of Esther.

Beal has it that

Memucan's vision of the other woman and Haman's vision of the other Jew are projected onto each other, onto the same screen, producing a kind of Judaization of the other woman and feminization of the other Jew. As this becomes visible, so do the ambiguities and instabilities in the images of Jewish identity and gender identity that are being created in the process.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 51.

This is so; however, a further notable feature of the story of Esther is the way in which the identities of structural disadvantage (gendered and ethnic) are both associated and dissociated. Nowhere is this more plain than in the ending of the book.

The right to write has been granted to both Esther and Mordecai. Esther, already, has stepped from the shadows of the seraglio to attain power. As we hear in 8:1–2:

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. [2] And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

At this point we have a significant reversal: Esther, who had previously done all that Mordecai commanded (2:20), is now in a position where *she* can bestow on Mordecai the honours previously belonging to his rival Haman; the king and queen are identified in their gracious honouring of Mordecai with wealth and authority.

However, by chapter 9, this is becoming unstable. Truly, indeed, “the man Mordecai became more and more powerful” (9:4). Power rests by turn in Esther’s and Mordecai’s hands. It is Esther whom the king wishes to please; it is she who is spontaneously granted an unsolicited request by bounty of Ahasuerus (9:12). The king, at her subsequent asking, authorizes a second day of lawful killing in the streets of Susa. Then, it is Mordecai who records these things (9:20) and sends letters to all the Jews enjoining them to keep the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar as “the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies.” Now, the Jews have already accepted this decree (9:23); indeed, they had already begun to act in this way without such written command. In spite of this, in 9:29 we have yet another edict merely repeating that which has already been pronounced and agreed. This one emanates from both Esther and Mordecai, who gave “full written authority” for what was already going on—in itself an interesting comment on the need to exercise power and control through writing. But in 9:32, there is textual slippage: for it is now the command of Queen Esther alone which confirmed the practices of Purim, and was recorded in writing.

However, if we observe here a silent (written) struggle for authority, the text is conclusive in its accounting of the result of this: in the final chapter of the book that bears her name, Esther is not even mentioned. As we have it in 10:2,

all the acts of [the king's] power and might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? [3] For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers....

By the time of 2 Maccabees (probably the late second century BCE), the feast of Purim has acquired a second designation. It is 'Mordecai's Day' (2 Maccabees 15:36). Esther has been written out, or written over. But if we pay attention to the book of Esther, we should not be overly dismayed by this. Write more. Write again. If writing once disseminated cannot be revoked, nor is it stable. What it seeks to fix exceeds, resists and subverts it. There is no divine guarantee attaching Word to Being in the book of Esther—just dangerous and unstable circulations of power, and a palimpsest of writing into and out of the record. The book of Esther is marked by excess—of feasting, of virgins, of death, and of writing. This excessive display tells a tale of inversions and parody upon power; it is the carnival in which the ultimate patriarch (God) is absent and all identity and all authority are unstable.

THE BOOK OF JOB AND SHAKESPEAREAN SUBJECTIVITY

Kathleen Lundeen

One might assume William Shakespeare achieved his full cultural stature years ago. In the past decade, however, two scholarly books, each of which has reached a large general audience, have argued otherwise. In 1998 Harold Bloom proposed in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* that homo sapiens didn't know how to be human until the latter part of the sixteenth century.¹ According to Bloom, personality, long assumed to be a biological or psychological trait, has its origin in Shakespearean drama. Six years after Bloom's publication, Stephen Greenblatt mused in *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* that his dramatic work is "so astonishing, so luminous, that it seems to have come from a god and not a mortal."² Though Greenblatt proceeds to locate Shakespeare in a very mortal world, like Bloom he intimates that the Bard, in some respects, is underived from literary tradition: "no one who responds intensely to Shakespeare's art can believe that the plays and poems came exclusively from his reading."³ In both studies, *Hamlet* emerges not only as the pinnacle of Shakespeare, but as a singular literary achievement. Before halting the search for Hamlet's literary paternity, however, it is worth asking, "Hast thou not considered my servaunt Job?"⁴

The resemblances between Shakespeare's other tragedies and the Book of Job are well established. Several decades ago Jan Kott described *King Lear* as the "new *Book of Job*."⁵ Soon to follow was Frank Kermode, who referred to Job as the "prototype" of *Lear* and showed how in the play

¹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ The Book of Job, translated by the Bishops Bible, 1.8. All subsequent quotations of the Book of Job are also from the Bishops Bible.

⁵ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Ltd., 1964), 104.

Shakespeare draws on the biblical drama thematically and rhetorically.⁶ More recently, Harold Fisch has extended the comparison, arguing that “the Job paradigm . . . is distributed among three characters: Gloucester, Lear, and Edgar.”⁷ In his analysis of biblical influence in Shakespeare, Fisch also shows how the Book of Job is echoed in *Julius Caesar*.⁸ In an earlier study William Burgess notes a structural similarity between the Book of Job and *Hamlet*—each protagonist has “friends,” dubious characters who have been designated to comfort him—and also describes Hamlet as “a man of moods,” who is “overweighted with a sense of responsibility and care,” an apt description of Job.⁹ Though Burgess observes two instances where Hamlet’s speech resembles that of Job, he does not consider the full extent to which Job haunts *Hamlet*. “In the final result,” he contends, “there is no parallel, but an opposite, in Hamlet and Job.”¹⁰ In fact, there is a strong affinity between Hamlet and Job. The psychology and aesthetics of the Book of Job permeate the play and in the most memorable moments, Hamlet channels Job.

In their critical tributes, Bloom and Greenblatt celebrate Shakespeare in ways that uncannily describe the author of Job. In the following discussion I will examine the Book of Job according to the criteria these leading Renaissance scholars use to argue Shakespeare’s singularity as a dramatist, as well as criteria articulated by an earlier scholar, who examined Shakespearean soliloquies. In the eyes of many, Shakespeare is distinguished in his ability to dramatize subjectivity. Long before Shakespeare, however, the writer of Job explored subjectivity with acute insight and sophistication.

To build his case that Shakespeare invented humanness, Bloom remarks on the capacity of Shakespeare’s characters for re-imagining themselves: “Literary character before Shakespeare,” he writes, “is relatively unchanging; women and men are represented as aging and dying, but not as changing because their relationship to themselves, rather than to the gods or God, has changed. In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they reconceive them-

⁶ Frank Kermode (ed.), *King Lear: A Casebook* (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1969), 12.

⁷ Harold Fisch, *The Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake: A Comparative Study* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1999), 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁹ William Burgess, *The Bible in Shakespeare: A Study of the Relation of the Works of William Shakespeare to the Bible* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1968), 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

selves. . . . [they embody] utterly different yet self-consistent voices."¹¹ Bloom's analysis of what it means to be human is precise and persuasive, but long before Shakespeare's title characters reconceive themselves, the man of Uz undergoes radical redefinition. Though Job's relationship to God is critical to the plot of the story, so is his relationship to himself. Watching Job reimagine himself is arresting. His transformation from a man in heart-wrenching despair to one in a state of enlightened serenity is a stunning metamorphosis by any measure. The stages of Job's emergence into self-knowledge are unwittingly demarcated by Job's friends, who intervene in his slow evolution to offer their own assessment of his predicament; their interruptions allow the reader to see the discrete stages of Job's transformation.

Shakespeare's characters, in Bloom's eyes, also stand out in literature as "extraordinary instances" of "how new modes of consciousness come into being."¹² Once again, however, we find the precedent in Job, who inaugurates a powerful mode of consciousness, a Herculean struggle to grasp the relationship between morality and fate. Job's inner wrestling even distinguishes him from most other biblical protagonists. Throughout the Hebrew Bible we encounter characters who either accept an incomprehensible fate as willed by God or accede to the logic of a moral law: those who do good in the sight of the Lord are rewarded while those who do evil are punished, a rule that is articulated in I. Kings and implied in other biblical books. When Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, he doesn't blink; similarly, Joseph doesn't complain of the cycle of injustice in which he finds himself. Moses dares to question God when he is given the assignment to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but he accepts the monumental task as soon as God shows his i.d., as it were. There are a few deviations from this stoic prototype: Elijah becomes despondent in the face of danger; after disobeying God, Jonah repents in an openly emotional fashion; and the Preacher articulates a crisis of faith in Ecclesiastes, to name a few. But it is Job who pushes the affective envelope and wails at his undeserved fate. His physical and emotional pain ignites philosophical torment as he attempts to find order in a universe that is severely out of joint.

To grasp the extraordinary achievement of the author of Job, it is helpful to consider the composite nature of the text. A simple folktale

¹¹ *Invention of the Human*, xix.

¹² *Ibid.*, xx.

frames a formal argument between Job and his friends, which constitutes the preponderance of the book. Though in this spliced text the narrator of the folktale presents Job as a man who accepts his fate with patient resignation, the architect of the theological debate portrays him as a highly analytical man who thinks as intensely as he feels.¹³ The forensic Job bemoans his predicament and exposes the absurdity in the argument that human suffering is purposeful for God or for man. This is the Job that gives birth to Shakespearean subjectivity. In Job, one encounters a protagonist who has a capacity for self-examination, self-adjudication, and self-growth that is so profound, it is tempting to describe it anachronistically as Shakespearean. The influence the biblical author exerted on Shakespeare is not only evident in the psychological complexity of Job; the author of Job endows his main character with a power of self-articulation that is at once majestic and poignant. Indeed, Job's rhetorical ability to make the universal personal, and the personal universal, is associated so strongly with Shakespeare, one easily forgets that the writer of Job antedated the Bard by 2000 years.

Particularly striking in a Shakespeare/Job comparison is the rhetorical mode for which Shakespeare is best known, the dramatic soliloquy, which is derivative of Job's moving monologues. The writer of Job takes the inarticulate sounds of grief—weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth—and transforms them into eloquent speech. Centuries later those stirring speeches serve as a template for the soul-baring orations of Shakespeare's loquacious characters. In his study of Shakespeare's soliloquies, Wolfgang Clemen locates more than three hundred in Shakespeare's plays and contends that before Shakespeare, soliloquies were only used occasionally to express self-reflection or inner conflict.¹⁴ In the tradition of dramatic discourse Job is a notable pre-Shakespearean instance of rhetorical self-examination. A side-by-side comparison of the two writers shows the probable influence of the author of Job on Shakespeare:

¹³ For a discussion of the Book of Job as a spliced narrative that produces competing morals, see Kathleen Lundeen, *Knight of the Living Dead: William Blake and the Problem of Ontology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press and London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 50–55.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, trans. Charity Scott Stokes (London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1987), 1.

When Lear is discarded by Goneril, he pronounces an epic curse on her:

Hear, Nature, hear; dear Goddess, hear:
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her.¹⁵

In Lear's graphic, anatomical denunciation is the faraway voice of Job, who, in a diabolical parody of Genesis, uncreates the universe:

Let the day perishe wherein I was borne, and the night in the whiche it was sayd, There is a man childe conceived.
The same day be [turned to] darknesse, and not regarded of God from above, neither let the light shyne upon it:
But let it be stayned with darknesse and the shadowe of death, let the [dimme] cloude fall upon it, whiche may make it terrible as a most bitter day....
Because it shut not up the doores of my mothers wombe, nor hyd sorowe from myne eyes.
Why died I not in the birth: why dyd not I perishe assoone as I came out of [my mothers] wombe.
Why set they upon their knees; why gave they me sucke with their brestes: Then should I nowe have lyen stil; I shoulde have slept, and ben at rest....
Or [why] was not I hyd, as a thing borne out of tune, [either] as young children which never sawe the light.¹⁶

In the above speeches both Lear and Job react to their pain with an attempt to halt the life force. While Lear invokes Nature to deny Goneril any generative capacity, Job, more dramatically, attempts to annul his own existence retroactively. In each speech woman is identified as the cause of sorrow (as though she unilaterally brought forth life), a theme that recurs in both works. When Lear encounters Edgar in the guise of a madman, Lear asks him, "Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou come to this?", as if cruelty had its roots in female progeny.¹⁷ Lear's extrapolation resembles that of Job, who directly cites woman as the source of pain:

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Russell Fraser (New York: New American Library, 1998), 1.4.282–288.

¹⁶ Job, 3.3–16.

¹⁷ *King Lear*, 3.4.48–49.

Man that is borne of woman, hath but a short time to lyve, and is full of miserie.

He commeth up, and is cut downe, like a floure: he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one state.¹⁸

Job's lament of the brevity and futility of mortal life reverberates in the voice of another of Shakespeare's characters, albeit one very unlike Job. Macbeth, in his final words, declares the vacuous nature of all human existence:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.¹⁹

Like Job, Macbeth reflects on the brevity and futility of mortal life in a simple, succinct metaphor:

Though the influence of Job on Shakespeare is most striking in the tragedies, it extends to the history plays. Notably, echoes of Job are heard in philosophical speeches in which characters acquire some measure of self-knowledge. In *Richard II*, for example, Richard recalls the awe with which others at one time regarded him:

Was this face the face
That every day under his household roof
Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
That, like the sun, did make beholders wink?
Was this the face that faced so many follies,
And was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?
A brittle glory shineth in this face,
As brittle as the glory is the face,
For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.²⁰

His reminiscence is remarkably similar in theme, syntactical repetition, and tone to that of Job, who yearns for his former days when he was viewed with awe by those around him:

¹⁸ Job, 14.1–2.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1998), 5.5.24–28.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1999), 4.1.280–88.

O that I were as I was in the monethes by past, and in the daies when
 God preserved me:
 When his light shined upon my head, when I went after the same light
 and shining, even through the darknesse: . . .
 When my wayes ranne over with butter, and the stonie rockes gave me
 rivers of oyle:
 When I went out to the gate, even to the judgement seate, and when I
 prepared my seate in the streete:
 The young men saw me and hid themselves, and the aged arose, and
 stodee up.
 The princes left of their talking, and layed their hand to their mouth.
 The mightie kept still their voyce, and their tongue cleaved to the rooffe
 of their mouth.
 When the eare heard me, it blessed me: when the eye sawe me, it gave
 witness to me: . . .
 I was an eye to the blinde, and a foote to the lame. . . .
 I brake the jawes of the unrighteous man, and pluckt the spoyle out of
 his teeth. . . .
 Unto me men gave eare, me they regarded, and with scilence they taried
 for my counsell. . . .
 After my woordes they replied not, and my talke dropped upon them.
 They wayted for me as for the raine.²¹

Like Richard, Job then deplores the utter rejection of those who once
 revered him:

But nowe they that are younger then I have me in derision: yea even they
 whose fathers I would have thought scorne to have set with the dogges
 of my cattell.²²

Though traces of Job can be found in many of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* has the most compelling link to the biblical drama. Not coincidentally, *Hamlet* has unusual stature among Shakespeareans, as noted earlier. Though Shakespeare's universe is crowded with personalities, according to Bloom only two were needed to invent humanness: "Falstaff and Hamlet are . . . the inauguration of personality. . . ." ²³ Citing Swinburne he observes, "Falstaff and Hamlet are the two most comprehensive consciousnesses in Shakespeare, or in anyone else." ²⁴ Though in some sense each of those characters is ubiquitous, neither one was

²¹ Job, 29.2–23. The twenty-ninth chapter of Job is also echoed in e.e. cummings's "my father moved through dooms of love."

²² Ibid., 30.1.

²³ *Invention of the Human*, 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 410.

immaculately conceived. Fittingly, the profligate philosopher seems to be a branch on more than one family tree while the great Dane has a less ambiguous genealogy: Hamlet was begotten by Job.²⁵

Though, as noted above, several of Shakespeare's characters show some likeness to Job, Hamlet bears the strongest family resemblance. Clemen's commentary on *Hamlet* is uncanny in its applicability to Job: "Not only is Hamlet one of the lonely heroes presented to us in Shakespeare's tragedies; he becomes progressively more isolated from and misunderstood by those around him."²⁶ Clemen speaks of an intimacy that develops between Hamlet and the audience, which well describes the relationship that develops between Job and the reader. He further observes that Hamlet "submits himself in the soliloquies to merciless self-interrogation" and claims that sometimes "Hamlet seems to work himself up to extremes of mood, to cascades of words."²⁷ Clemen also notes that in most of the soliloquies, "we find measured and balanced lines reflecting Hamlet's moments of insight and sagacity beside clusters of questions or exclamations."²⁸ Job's rhetorical effusion is similarly offset by moments of clarity. In response to Eliphaz, who argues that Job's suffering is self-induced—"who ever perished beyng an innocent"—Job responds with an outburst of emotion: "O that my complaynt were truely wayed, and my punishment layde in the balaunces together / For nowe it woulde be heavier then the sande of the sea: and this is the cause, that my wordes fayle me. / For the arrowes of the almightie are upon me, the poysan therof hath drunke up my spirite, and the terrible feares of God are set against me."²⁹ Soon after, however, he replies to

²⁵ Harold Bloom notices "a link between Shakespeare's Falstaff and Montaigne's Socrates" (*Invention of the Human*, 292) while Stephen Greenblatt argues that Falstaff was modeled after one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, a writer named Robert Greene (*Will in the World*, 216–225). A less likely candidate than Socrates or Greene is one suggested by the bard himself. Though Shakespeare only refers to Job twice in his plays, on both occasions the comparison is not to the sublime Danish prince but to Falstaff. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Page proposes that Falstaff is "as poor as Job," a comparison that Falstaff elaborates on in *Henry the Fourth, Part Two*: "I am as poor as Job...but not so patient." The juxtaposition is wonderfully ludicrous. The man who "eschued evill" is hardly a prototype for the man who (lustily) chewed evil. See William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. William Green (New York: New American Library, 2006), 5.5.158, and *Henry IV, Part Two*, ed. Norman N. Holland (New York: New American Library, 2002), 1.2.131–32.

²⁶ *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, 119.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁹ Job, 4.7, 6.2–4.

Bildad's assertion, "God will not cast away a vertuous man, neither will be helpe the ungodly," with sober concurrence: "I knowe it is so of a trueth: For how may a man [compared] unto God be justified."³⁰

Hamlet's intimacy with the audience is balanced by an intimacy with himself, as noted by Bloom and Greenblatt. In the preface to *Invention of the Human*, Bloom argues that "Self-hearing is [the] royal road to individuation . . .," a trait immediately associated with Hamlet, and Greenblatt similarly contends that Shakespeare made "an epochal breakthrough" by "perfect[ing] the means to represent inwardness" and calls Hamlet "the prince of the inward insurrection."³¹ From his first mutterings to his last words, Hamlet's favorite conversational companion is, well, Hamlet. His none-too-subtle death wish is addressed to himself:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!³²

It is Job, however, who teaches Shakespeare's prince of gloom that talking to oneself creates the best reverberations. Though Job's long philosophical speeches are ostensibly addressed to his friends, his discourse is predominantly introspective self-questioning:

My fleshe is clothed with wormes and dust of the earth: my skinne is
withered and become horrible.
My dayes passe over more spedyly then a weavers shuttle, and are spent
without hope. . . .
my soule wisheth rather to perishe and die, then my bones to remayne.
I can see no remedy, I shall live no more: O spare me then, for my dayes
are but vanitie.³³

Of course, morbid musing occurs elsewhere in both *Hamlet* and Job. Hamlet's most famous existential reflection—"To be, or not to be"—is a permutation of Job's—"And that I were as though I had not ben."³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 8.20, 9.2.

³¹ *Invention of the Human*, xix and *Will in the World*, 299 and 303.

³² William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1998), 1.2.129–34.

³³ Job, 7.5–6, 15–16.

³⁴ *Hamlet*, 3.1.56 and Job, 10.19.

Hamlet's self-hearing and self-speaking suggest he has no peer in the kingdom, but his alienation extends even further according to Bloom, who writes, "Hamlet appears too immense a consciousness for *Hamlet*; a revenge tragedy does not afford the scope for the leading Western representation of an intellectual."³⁵ Bloom claims, moreover, "The phenomenon of Hamlet, the prince without the play, is unsurpassed in the West's imaginative literature"; in a word, "the prince transcends his play."³⁶ Yet far more than Hamlet, Job is too immense a consciousness for his literary container. As the drama advances, Job exceeds the imaginative possibilities of the philosophical debate, which collapses under the weight of his intellect. The Book of Job, which sets out to answer the question *Why do bad things happen to good people?* fails to reach its own teleology. Instead of providing a response, it surrenders to its protagonist, whose expanded perspective on life yields enlightenment rather than explanation.

Job's fierce intellectual and spiritual wrestling gives way to a compendium of rhetorical questions, first posed by Elihu and then by God, which dramatically alter the course of the story. Clemen's observations that in *Hamlet* "the audience is given no answer to all the play's unsolved problems" and "Hamlet's doubts spread to the audience" accurately describe the elusive nature of the Book of Job and its readers; but the elliptical narrative in Job appears to influence Shakespeare in another way.³⁷ Greenblatt argues, "Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold."³⁸ Specifically, he suggests, "With *Hamlet*, Shakespeare found that if he refused to provide himself or his audience with a familiar, comforting rationale that seems to make it all make sense, he could get to something immeasurably deeper."³⁹ Job emerges as a probable model for this practice. Although the folktale presents an explanation for Job's suffering, the rationale for that suffering becomes increasingly

³⁵ *Invention of the Human*, 383.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 384–385. Though in this strong assertion of the superiority of *Hamlet* Bloom limits the field to "imaginative literature," he does not suggest elsewhere that biblical writers achieve what Shakespeare does.

³⁷ *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, 133–134.

³⁸ *Will in the World*, 323–324.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

tenuous as the debate progresses. In the thick of the debate, readers find themselves witnessing an effect with no apparent cause. Greenblatt's elaboration on why the Bard eliminated "a familiar, comforting rationale" in *Hamlet* is a plausible explanation for the strategy used by the author of Job: "The excision of motive...expressed Shakespeare's root perception of existence, his understanding of what could be said and what should remain unspoken, his preference for things untidy, damaged, and unresolved over things neatly arranged, well made, and settled. The opacity was shaped by his experience of the world and of his own inner life: his skepticism, his pain, his sense of broken rituals, his refusal of easy consolations."⁴⁰ If we know precious little about Shakespeare, we know precious less about the writer of the Book of Job. Notwithstanding, Job's agonizing sense of injustice leaves no doubt that the author had first-hand experience with skepticism, pain, and broken rituals. In addition, the omission of a conclusion to the formal debate argues that the author of Job, like Shakespeare, believed some things should remain unspoken since honest irresolution is preferable to phony consolation.

Bloom makes an interesting case that *Hamlet* is not the victim of human circumstances but of literary construction: "At the end, Hamlet is no longer a real personage condemned to suffer inside a play, and the wrong play at that. The personage and the play dissolve into each other."⁴¹ Once again, we find the precedent in the Book of Job since Job the character and Job the book also dissolve into each other. In the end, the man named Job is the wisdom of the book of Job. All that is left of the argument at the close of the story is Job himself. Naming Job and *Hamlet* after the protagonist is not merely honorific but necessary since in each, the man becomes the text and the text the man.

The cultural authority of *Hamlet* is spelled out by Bloom, whose claims for Shakespeare verge on the messianic: "He extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist."⁴² Bloom's first point is well taken. Though the rhetoric of Job is astonishing, not much of it has entered the public discourse. The most familiar line in fact does not come from the fighting Job of the debate but from

⁴⁰ Ibid., 324.

⁴¹ *Invention of the Human*, 12.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

the longsuffering Job of the folktale ("The Lorde gave & the Lord hath taken away").⁴³ By contrast, for over four hundred years Shakespeare's dramatic verse has reverberated throughout the Western world.

Bloom's second point that Shakespeare's principal characters have become our mythology is true enough, but Job's mythic status in the West far surpasses that of Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, or anyone else. In everyday discourse, a person with a sudden piling on of problems invariably invites reference to Job, and some dictionaries even include the entry "Job," defined as someone who perseveres in the face of extreme hardship.⁴⁴ Though the names "Hamlet," "Lear," "Othello," and "Macbeth" connote distinctive psyches, they remain proper nouns and have not entered the lexicon as generic signifiers.

Bloom's third claim for Shakespeare—that he is our psychologist—is supported by Clemen, who observes the "variety of mood, content and movement" in Shakespeare's soliloquies, signaling Hamlet's "contradictory state of mind, which can change completely from one soliloquy to the next."⁴⁵ If we telescope Job's permutations, however, we also find sudden shifts in thought and emotion as we observe his dramatic movement from anguish to serenity. As noted earlier, in the debate, which dominates the Book of Job, we first encounter the fighting Job, who howls at his fate and curses his birth. In response to the argument that his suffering is self-inflicted by sin, Job enters a philosophical stage and proceeds to question the purpose of existence: if human error causes pain, as orthodox theology argues, he reasons, what is the logic of living? Job then moves into a confrontational state of mind and addresses God directly about his predicament, "why hast thou set me [as a marke] against thee, so that I am a burden to my selfe" and not long after, tightens the screws in his challenge to God: "Thinkest thou it welldone to oppresse me: to cast me of beyng the workes of thy handes; and to mayntayne the counsell of the ungodly?"⁴⁶ Without flinching, Job states, "Thy handes have made me, & fashioned me altogether rounde about, wilt thou then destroy me."⁴⁷ (Centuries later William

⁴³ Job, 1.21.

⁴⁴ *Collins Dictionary* includes the following definition of "Job": "any person who withstands great suffering without despairing." (See *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, second edition, ed. Patrick Hanks [London and Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1986], 821.)

⁴⁵ *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*, 121–122.

⁴⁶ Job, 7.20, 10.3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.8.

Blake would put a similar question to the tyger of his well known lyric: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?")⁴⁸ When Zophar, one of the friends, argues that Job deserves more punishment than he is receiving, Job is roused out of self-pity to self-defense. He declares to all three self-appointed jurors: "I have understanding as well as ye, and am not inferior to you" and goes on to accuse them of being "workmaisters of lyes" and "unprofitable phisitions."⁴⁹

The author of Job is astute in depicting the stages of the human mind as it grapples with calamity. Job's initial helplessness and despair are followed by an attempt to make sense of his personal tragedy, which in turn is succeeded by a fierce refusal to believe he merited such suffering. The author of Job also exposes the cold competitiveness in human nature in his portrayal of the three friends, who upon finding themselves in a superior position to that of Job, take full advantage of his vulnerability and presume to possess moral authority in the situation. Their smug finger-wagging barely conceals their resentment for the many times their "perfect" friend outshined them.

In the midst of defending himself before his sometimes companions, Job considers the inscrutability of God and wonders, "May a dead man lyve againe."⁵⁰ Unlike Hamlet, Job proves to be as good as listener as he is a speaker, first hearing out Elihu, who brings some perspective to Job's dilemma, and then listening to God. The necessity of surrendering overwrought analysis and adopting uncomplicated wonder becomes apparent, and the effect of Job's mental surrender is pronounced. Instead of an answer to the question that has tormented him, he receives insight that he can only express as a movement from reasoning to sight: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the eare, but nowe myne eye seeth thee."⁵¹ Thus Job emerges not only as our psychologist, but as our philosopher and theologian.

Locating a literary source in a text often underscores the genius of the later writer whose derivative text is deemed superior to the original. In this vein Greenblatt argues, "Throughout Shakespeare's career as a playwright he was a brilliant poacher—deftly entering into territory marked out by others, taking for himself what he wanted, and walking

⁴⁸ See "The Tyger" in William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, newly revised ed., David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 25 (20).

⁴⁹ Job, 12.3, 13.4.

⁵⁰ Job, 14.14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 42.5.

away with his prize under the keeper's nose."⁵² Shakespeare's poaching in the Book of Job was indeed brilliant, but it would be hard to argue he stole the prize. The author of Job dares to present in dramatic discourse a naked exposition of the problem of moral incoherence in the world. Through breathtaking rhetoric he unblinkingly probes the "why" of human suffering, allowing us to hear thoughts that, in the unforgettable poetry of William Wordsworth, "often lie too deep for tears."⁵³ Even to those who have no use for the Bible as a sacred text, the power of Job is hard to escape. Percy Shelley, an avowed atheist who openly declared his irreligiousness, revered the Book of Job. A startling assertion in his "Essay on Christianity" leaves us to conclude that Shakespeare, as a poacher of the biblical drama, was in rather good company: "The sublime dramatic poem entitled Job had familiarized [Jesus Christ's] imagination with the boldest imagery afforded by the human mind and the material world."⁵⁴ The remarkable text that taught Jesus how to awaken the soul taught Shakespeare how to unleash it.

⁵² *Will in the World*, 152.

⁵³ See "Intimations of Immortality" in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1965), 191 (11.203).

⁵⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, Vol. VI, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (London: Ernest Benn Ltd./New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 229.

SACRED TROPES: THE LAUGH OF ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF SUBJECTIVITY

Roberta Sterman Sabbath

If not overdone, laughter is generally approved by biblical commentary in the Talmud—the Jewish canonical text that comments on the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible or Old Testament Scripture). “Moderation in hilarity” (Aboth 85).¹ In the Tanakh, the aged Abraham first grovels when hearing the divine word promising him a child, thinks to himself, and then laughs (Genesis 17:17).² His laughter is recorded in the text but receives no divine reaction.³ The sequence seems natural to 21st century sensibilities. Yet from an exegetical perspective, the sequence of events marks a dramatic change in theology, cult practice, and subjectivity. The narrative event indicates reflection, judgment, and volition. This essay explores the subjectivity that explodes out of Abraham’s laugh. To that purpose, a discussion of the four literary tropes, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, serves to investigate and reveal that idiosyncratic subjectivity virtually created by this biblical laughter.

With the declared presence of Abraham’s interiority, subjectivity becomes possible. The word subjectivity stands for how a human being thinks what s/he can do, feel, express, dream. The subjectivity born out of the laugh of Abraham is characteristic to monotheism and one that engenders specific cultural practices. The subjectivity introduced by this biblical event validates individual desire, power, and thought; thereby making the individual voice and action independent from nature, from divinity, and from community. According to Stephen Geller, the idea of individuation is a direct result of development of monotheism:⁴

¹ “Aboth,” *Babylonian Talmud*. Chapter Five (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 85.

² A laugh of derision at the *hubris* or folly of the promise might have been expected. In fact most of the laughter in the Abrahamic sacred texts is the laughter of derision (Morreall *Taking Laughter Seriously* 9).

³ In a related biblical anecdote, Sarah too laughs, but to herself. Although she is self-critical of her own laughter and tries to deny the fact of her laughter in the face of the divine messengers, no divine punishment is dispensed to either Abraham or Sarah and the matter is textually dropped.

⁴ Stephen A. Geller, “The God of the Covenant,” *One God or Many?: Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Transactions of Casco Bay Assyriology Institute, 2000), 298.

Deuteronomic religion was, then, the first stage of Israelite religion that proclaimed unequivocal monotheism, but only in relation to, and in tension with, the concept of the unitary individual.... There seems no reason, then, not to posit [that] the deuteronomic religion, in fact, posits a unity of the believer, as well as of his God.... the discovery of the individual, i.e., the indivisible, united self, was, in Israel, an achievement of the deuteronomic covenant religion and its prophetic sponsors.... The individualism added an element that immediately stood in tension with the older collectivist viewpoints.⁵

Once individual identity is presumed and separated from the supernatural powers, the concept of subjectivity also becomes necessary to sustain meaning in life. Paul de Man, discussing Nietzsche, joins the army recognizing that subjectivity is a metaphor, a fiction, and an imaginative geste that each of us needs to sustain our lives:

...the idea of individuation, of the human subject as a privileged viewpoint, is a mere metaphor by means of which man protects himself from his insignificance by forcing his own interpretation of the world upon the entire universe, substituting a human-centered set of meanings that is reassuring to his vanity for a set of meanings that reduces him to being a mere transitory accident in the cosmic order.⁶

In addition to the recognition that subjectivity is a site for independent thinking and moral choices came the recognition that the world of language, in the form of symbols and narratives, plays a large a role in the formation of the individual human view of itself.

Giambattista Vico claimed that language itself configures subjectivity.⁷ According to Vico, subjectivity is formed within a cultural landscape where all kinds of symbols, stories, and imaginative tools formulate and reinforce who we think we are. Many followers, including several discussed in this essay, embraced Vico's project. One such follower, Isaiah Berlin, summarizes the weight Vico places on language as the site for human cognitive development:

[T]he notion that there can be a science of mind which is the history of its development, the realization that ideas evolve, that knowledge is not a static network of eternal, universal, clear truths, either Platonic or Cartesian,

⁵ Ibid., 295–300.

⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 111.

⁷ Giambattista Vico, 1668–1744, a professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples.

but a social process, that this process is traceable through (indeed, is in a sense identical with) the evolution of symbols... words gestures, pictures.⁸

These symbols make up narratives that we experience in innumerable forms on a daily basis. Every story we hear or read about, from mass media, sermons, political speech, history, and organizational events such as sports and special interests, all have a discourse—a set of approved and accepted practices, laws, and codes, underlying their structure⁹ that spring from identifiable spiritual, cultural, and philosophical beliefs.

Discussion of narrative and its connection to subjectivity are here explored through an examination of the use of literary tropes and their connection to the psychological experience of being human in a specific cultural landscape. The very word, “narrative,” acknowledges that fact and blows open the naïve idea that the symbols, words, gestures, and pictures send no other message than their literal references. The word “trope” acknowledges the imaginative mechanism by which a word, phrase, or complete story points to other levels of meaning. The tropic mechanism takes the literal meaning of a word or narrative and points to other ideas, characters, and events. All texts have tropic references associated with them. Even if it is not obvious, a text makes comparisons and references.

The type of connection between a word and the meanings it points to determines the type of trope. Metaphor occurs when one object (represented by a word or narrative) is identified with another such that attributes of the second are ascribed to the first.¹⁰ It is perhaps the first trope to dominate imaginative creation. Allegory is its extension and creates complete narratives that suggest a beginning, middle, and end. Allegories often take on political or religious meaning. Myth, an even more developed narrative, provides a foundational belief system

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays on the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1955) 113. Hayden White provides an inclusive discussion of tropes and the way thinkers relate the tropes to the development of mankind and to the “‘styles of thought,’ which might appear more or less hidden, in any representation of reality, whether manifestly poetic or prosaic.” *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1972), 32–33.

⁹ White describes the narrative traditions of several literary criticisms in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987).

¹⁰ Holman, C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon (eds.), *A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition (New York: Mcmillan, 1992), 287.

for a society or a religion.¹¹ According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, myth explains natural events and cosmological or supernatural truth for a society, a culture, or a religion:

The kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and... the difference lies, not in the quality of intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied.¹²

Myth is logical and does, in fact, explain reality. However, its content lacks the accountability of scientific or objective proof. The Adam and Eve story is considered a myth, or mythic truth, in the sense that it comprises a fundamental part of a belief system, is logically presented, and its symbols represent a universal and timeless depiction of supernatural reality.

Before the biblical laugh in the Tanakh, the stories of creation, human emergence, and the apocalyptic flood are all told as metaphorical narratives, describing irrational and remote miraculous events largely accepted on faith. Deflores writes:

Vico, for example, calls a social setting in a world of metaphor irrational... a fable [that] should be viewed as having a pre-rational, meta-rational, or often a preconscious character... Myth first arises in the archaic atmosphere where everything is still immersed in the "synchronic"...¹³

Here "synchronic" describes a portrayal of things that are unchanging, constant, timeless, and universal. For example, mythical gods and goddesses are typically used to represent what is often thought of as universal or essential to the human experience. In contrast, the metonymic trope includes a diachronic human experience that is affected by time and history.

With the shift to the metonymic narrative event, the laugh of Abraham launches just such a diachronic telling of human experience that feels realistic in a visceral way. The reader can understand a laugh

¹¹ According to Deflores, Vico endorsed the association of myth and metaphor in discussions of tropes because both examples of figurative language operate in the "synchronic" world and attest to the continuity and creativity of man's ideational thought—suggesting that both figures, myth and metaphor, spring from antiquity and continue to operate for the contemporary imagination (586).

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology and Myth: Lectures, 1951–1982* (New York: Blackwell, 1985), 230.

¹³ Gillo Deflores, "Myth and Metaphor in Vico and in Contemporary Aesthetics." *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1969), 577–590.

at unexpected and unlikely good news. Abraham “laughs to himself” and is skeptical, doubting the news that he, at ninety-nine, will father a child with Sarah, aged ninety. His response is a reasonable, uninhibited human reaction, even if the source of the news is the divine voice. With the laugh of Abraham, the emphasis has irrevocably shifted from the supernatural to the natural world.

When a distinction in the text is made between supernatural, universal, and timeless powers, on the one hand, and realistic human ones, on the other, and when a realistic depiction of the human experience is emphasized, even privileged, in the narrative, then the trope of metonymy prevails. Metonymy implies a substitution of the name of an object closely associated with a word for the word itself, i.e., the “crown” standing in for “royalty.” The relationship represents an essential closeness between the word and the whole it references. Kenneth Burke writes, “The basic ‘strategy’ in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible.”¹⁴ The purpose of the metonymic trope in language is to portray, as closely as possible, the real human experience.

Metonymy is the trope that characterizes Tanakh narrative. The biblical narratives of the Tanakh do portray realistic human experiences and events. In his discussion of biblical narrative, Robert Alter writes:

Vigorous movement of biblical writing away from the stable closure of the mythological world and toward the indeterminacy, the shifting causal concatenations, the ambiguities of a fiction made to resemble the uncertainties of life in history.¹⁵

Alter suggests that the radical shift from the epic/mythical form of earlier cultural expression to the prose/metonymic form of Tanakh compilers is an apparent self-consciousness strategy designed to mark the theological shift.

As Ira Nadel explains, within the tradition of metonymy, the literal is not lost as is the case in the metaphoric narrative tradition.¹⁶ Nadel suggests that the metonymic tradition is central to the rabbinic Talmudic thought. “Rabbinic thought is itself largely metonymic,” writes Nadel. While the supernatural has an impact on the events described in the narrative, the narrative itself largely describes the experience from a

¹⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: California UP, 1969), 506.

¹⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 27.

¹⁶ Ira B. Nadel, *Joyce and the Jews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 122.

human perspective. The characters are all too human, in many cases. They are imperfect; now courageous, now petty; now wise, now blind. They possess free will and often make the wrong choices.

In addition to the Tanakh, one, perhaps more familiar, aesthetic standard that also privileges the metonymic tradition is Aristotle's *Poetics*. According to the Aristotelian standards for an ideal theatrical production, the action there must have nothing irrational.¹⁷ Only by this strategy, Aristotle believed, could audiences identify themselves in a work and thereby recognize the cautionary message. Aristotle admired the portrayal of immorality and its just punishment as a way to teach right morality. If the purpose of the Aristotelian aesthetic is to reveal moral purpose, then the characters better be believable enough for audiences to identify with. According to the aesthetic of both Aristotle and the Tanakh, moral purpose is best understood by audiences through the behavior and action of the characters. Action onstage portrays behavior offstage and provides the window into character. Character is an indicator of the moral purpose of the individual. According to both the Aristotelian and the Tanakh traditions, an individual has the ability to make a moral choice, will take action based on that moral choice, and must face the consequences of that action based on the moral choice.

Underlining the profound significance of the metonymic narrative style introduced by the Tanakh, Julia Kristeva maintains that human sacrifice terminates with the introduction of metonymic narrative. Because the metonymic narrative tradition distinguishes the human from the divine and focuses on the human side of that metaphysical equation, Kristeva maintains alternative ritualistic worship practices replaced¹⁸ human sacrifice. Instead of offering human sacrifice to the gods, the monotheistic tradition developed taboos, or injunctions against certain behaviors, conditions, and relationships that reinforce the boundaries between the human and the divine, thus displacing the logic of identity that justifies sacrifice. The presence of taboos, which Mary Douglas also explains replaced human sacrifice, reinforces a profound legal structure

¹⁷ Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans. George Whalley, eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ or "displaced" in Lacanian terms.

from which all behavior is measured, judged, and conceived.¹⁹ On the one hand, sacrifice presumes an alliance with, not a separation from, divinity and implies that the most favorable way for the human being to express a relationship with the divine powers is to slay one of its own as an offering to the divine powers.²⁰ On the other hand, taboos offer an alternate way to think about a relationship with the divine that values life on the ground, not in the sky.

The imposition of a separation between the human and the divine figure large in Leviticus' holiness code as Kristeva explains:

[Evan Zuesse] has noted that the Bible comprises a metonymic logic of taboos (which rely on displacement) that could be contrasted with the metaphorical nature of the sacrifice (which relies on deletion and substitution). This has led him to suggest that the Bible marks out the end of the sacrificial religion and replaces it with a system of rules, prohibitions, and moral codes....²¹

Kristeva explains that the world of myth presumes a narcissistic fusion with the divinity that is tantamount to a lethal condition—true in the personal psychological condition as well as historically true for ritual cultural practices.

The salutary antidote to this cultural, religious, and often psychological fusion, Kristeva argues, is the development of subjectivity that implies a separation between the human and the divine and its concurrent development through language as the antidote for this lethal stage and for the promise of subjectivity. Kristeva writes, "It [this transformation through stages] is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of life, of new significance."²² To translate the idea of subjectivity into the lived experience of subjectivity and the subject, Kristeva explains that the Book of Leviticus, with its consistent insistence through ritual of separation and boundaries, introduces the idea of the distinct, individual subject:

Therefore, it could be said that a biblical text (the Book of Leviticus), which delineates the precise limits of abjection (from skin to food, sex,

¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 112–113.

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, "Reading the Bible," *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, eds. David Jobling et al. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 94–95.

²¹ Ibid., 95

²² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 15.

and moral codes), has developed a true archeology of the advent of the subject. Indeed, this Book recounts the subject's delicate and painful detachment—moment by moment, layer by layer, step by step—as well as his journey from narcissistic fusion to an autonomy that is never really “his own,” never “clean,” never complete, and never securely guaranteed in the Other.²³

Kristeva explains that the occurrence of blood and semen in human daily bodily functions are considered states in alliance with divine powers and are therefore considered impure.²⁴ So while the word, “impure,” typically is culturally coded as negative, a finer understanding of the concept reveals the powerful state of creativity that “impure” suggests. Fluids, by their very nature, cross boundaries, are often associated with creating life, and are disorderly. Validating the internal life of an individual and emphasizing the human experience of living has resulted, according to Kristeva's theory, in profound social and cultural adaptations.

Synecdoche, the third trope, describes a word that represents an actual part of the whole such as the phrase “all hands on deck” where “hands,” the part, stands in for the whole “sailor.” Kenneth Burke explains synecdoche as, “We might say that representation (synecdoche) stresses a *relationship* or *connectedness* between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either directions.”²⁵

In the case of this biblical narrative, the child of the union, Yitzchak (Jacob), stands as a synecdoche, not only as a part of Abraham and Sarah, but also, when Jacob's name is changed to Israel, that part which will stand for all of the nation of Israel. With the birth of Yitzchak, meaning laughter, the child becomes the synecdoche for humanity. Yitzchak stands for all the generations that follow. Laughter itself is the synecdoche for humanity, representing the joys of being alive, making life, and choosing life over death as the nexus of the religion.

²³ Ibid., 96.

²⁴ Everett Fox does a good job of explaining that the term “impure” and its often used equivalent, unclean, do not refer to a sinful state or to the sinfulness of the human being but rather refer to any state of human bodily functions that suggest either the divine powers of procreation or porousness typical in afflictions of the skin (lacking clear boundaries and order) and therefore logically in need of control to distinguish the human from the divine. *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. and trans. Everett Fox (New York: Random House, 1997), 556.

²⁵ Burke, 509.

Unlike the cosmologies where “negation of self is magnification of self,” the monotheistic cosmology empowers the individual.²⁶ It values this inside>outside direction as a synecdoche that the power of the generations of chosen people will lie in their internal qualities that are then acted upon.²⁷ In like manner, Elaine Scary calls the central mystery of monotheism the importance of taking the inside of the body outside. Thus the birth of the child is a sign of the monotheistic God. What is inside is good and holy, e.g., a child.²⁸

Irony, the fourth trope discussed here, implies words that do not mean what they seem to be saying; for example, when someone says, “I could care less” but means the opposite; or, as in the case of Socrates who pretends to know nothing. Irony is associated with emotional restraint.²⁹ There is also a sense, when irony is used, that the text “takes life exactly as it finds it.”³⁰ Hayden White connects the ironic stage with the rational stage that follows earlier human and cultural developmental stages and is the culmination of the maturing adolescent/adult and society with characteristic cognitive control.³¹ According to this line of thought that considers irony a final stage in the progression of individual maturity, Abraham has leaped from the narcissistic stage into a more mature stage where language is possible. He is now able to express his internal thoughts without fear and of necessity. In so doing, he makes his own subjectivity possible. This is the stage of maturity that allows

²⁶ Geller, 295.

²⁷ The inside>outside direction that is morally bound characterizes the healthy ability to express (internal) emotions by (external) language, empowers the individual, and figures in the ability to establish a subjectivity able to make independent judgment.

²⁸ Scary and Bal discuss the importance of this concept and, like Julia Kristeva, connect the cessation of human sacrifice to this belief. Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988), 109. Elaine Scary, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 204.

²⁹ Holman, 254.

³⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: four essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 41.

³¹ Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 9. White applies the four trope names to Piaget's four stages of human development. The newborn, like the mythic perspective, does not distinguish between self and other, between the self and the mother, between the self and objects. Piaget calls the maturation to the next developmental stage at about 1 1/2 years the Copernican Revolution because of the dramatic “decentration” of the infant at being able to distinguish the self from the other. Jean Piaget, *The Child and Reality: Problems of Genetic Psychology* (New York: Grossman, 1973), 15–16.

for judgments of right and wrong and for the ability to think about controlling one's social and natural environment.

Abraham's laugh itself is ironic. Irony, the fourth and final trope here addressed, comes when one text or cultural practice parodies or pokes fun at another text or cultural practice. The trope of irony that comes into play with the laugh of Abraham underlines the dramatic difference between, on the one hand, the human relationship to gods who represent nature and, on the other hand, a divine that is separate from nature. Submission out of fear marks the appropriate behavior in the face of a pantheon of gods. Critical thinking is possible and often appropriate and rewarded in the face of a monotheistic divine. Abraham's internal laughter, and shortly thereafter, Sarah's expressive laughter, Genesis 18:12, serve to parody the dramatic difference between two different sanctioned behaviors acceptable under the two different theologies and underline the preferable nature of the monotheistic theology. The ironic mode presumes an intellectual separation from events that allows for judgment, reflection, critique, doubt, and interaction with the events. Uncritical submission is far from this picture.

In the Sodom and Gomorra story, the biblical text also introduces an ironic narrative subsequent to the twin laughter events that also reinforces the new set of laws, behaviors, and codes appropriate for the monotheistic theology. This subsequent narrative, again, foregrounds the change in human subjectivity that has occurred after the laugh. This narrative comes as a dramatic, even shocking, turn of events. Abraham had just entered into a divine covenant and had gotten a lifelong wish—the promise of the birth of a child with Sarah. The audience could reasonably anticipate a benign collaboration between Abraham and the divine will in the narrative to follow. Within a mythical order, Abraham would perhaps pray or make a sacrifice to mark his gratitude for the long-awaited child. Both these mythic narrative options would reinforce a submissive human role to supernatural powers. But the contrary happens. As though to underline the dramatic shift from human submission to human subjectivity in the face of the divine will and to foreground the audacity possible of a subjectivity independent of the divine will, the biblical narrative produces the ironic and audacious story about Abraham's advocacy for Sodom and Gomorra. In effect Abraham argues several points with the divine will. He advocates a position contrary to the divine will; he negotiates with the divine will; and he ultimately collaborates with the divine will. In so doing, the

biblical narrative is ironic because it parodies what would have been the behavior of the human within a mythic cosmology paradigm.

Laughter and the internal dialogue have displaced groveling as a response to divine presence and represent ironic action, reflecting a conceptual shift (here a shift in theology). Morreall argues that a conceptual shift is key to the production of laughter.³² Schopenhauer, writes Morreall, suggests that humor occurs “because [some event or verbal expression] violates what is supposed to be inviolable—the rational order of things.” Humor releases us from “constraints of logic and reason itself.”³³ As Schopenhauer explains,

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects, which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of that incongruity.³⁴

Abraham’s laugh acknowledges a profound theological shift. What was not possible within an earlier cosmology has now become possible. Subjectivity has been born making laughter possible. After all, one does not laugh alone; laughter is a shared experience.

With the laugh of Abraham, monotheism arrives as the “creative and ideational thought,” using Vico’s language, wherein the human experience is largely separate from the divine experience. Although there are those who believe that the supernatural intervenes within daily life, an undeniable autonomy emerges to reflect, to act, to disagree, to alter nature. All become possible under the rubric of a monotheistic paradigm. The Qur’an’s telling of the sequence is succinct, “So when fear departed from Abraham [after the covenant is made] and good news came to him [fathering a child with Sarah], he began to plead with Us [Allah] for Lot’s people Surely Abraham was forbearing, tender-hearted, oft-returning (to Allah)” in Q 11:74–75.³⁵ Human focus shifts from the skies to the ground. The sacred narrative of the Tanakh describes everyday choices, whether the events are routine or extraordinary.

³² John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 47.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁴ Qtd in Morreall, 17.

³⁵ *The Holy Qur’ān*, trans. Maulana Muhammad Ali (Dublin, Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha‘at Islam Lahore Inc., 2002), 467–468.

Having an emotional and intellectual sense of distance from the social and legal system in which we are embedded permits critical thought about those systems. The hope is that individuals can recognize authority of all kinds and draw the best possible influences from those sources, constructing identities built on reflection, knowledge, choice, and life-giving morality.

CROSSING OUTLAWS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JESSE JAMES AND JESUS OF NAZARETH

Robert Paul Seesengood and Jennifer L. Koosed

Then and there was concocted the most diabolical plan ever conceived and adopted to rid the State of an outlaw since the world began.... That an outlaw shall pillage is to be expected; that in his wild and crime-stained career even red-handed murder and cruel assassination may stalk companion-like beside him would cause surprise to no one; but that the Governor of the State, the conservator of the liberties of her people, and the preserver and executor of her laws, should league with harlots, thieves and murderers to procure assassination, is astounding almost beyond belief.

– Frank Triplett, *The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James*, 219.

Am I a bandit that you come to arrest me in the dark of night with swords and cudgels?

– Mark 14:48

Betrayal of a Bandit

Jesse Woodson James was shot in the back of the head with a .45 Colt Navy revolver by Robert Newton Ford on April 3, 1882. By the time of his death, Jesse James was the most notorious gunman and bandit on the ante-Bellum Missouri frontier; wanted posters dotted the territory promising \$5000 for his seizure or murder with an additional \$5000 upon his arraignment. Bob Ford and his brother Charlie had recently joined James' gang of bandits. Planning a new caper, both Ford brothers were staying with Jesse in his home in St. Joseph, Missouri, along with Jesse's wife and infant children. On the morning of April 3rd, after a night's sleep, a full breakfast, and some light chores with the horses, they both drew on Jesse James while he was in his own front parlor.

Describing the scene from the public testimony of Bob and Charles Ford, one biographer writes:

On the morning of April 3rd, 1882, Jesse James stood in a chair, brushing some pictures with a feather duster. His coat was off, as the weather was warm; the door was open to admit the breeze, and he feared that suspicion might be attracted if he continued to wear his belt containing one pistol.... Laying his belt aside, as he had often done before... he got upon a chair to use a feather duster, and here he committed the fatal mistake of turning his back to the Fords.¹

Bob Ford fired the fatal shot. Charlie, according to later testimony, drew but did not fire; neither brother spoke a word. Jesse heard them as they drew and cocked their revolvers but offered only a slight turn of his head; he made no attempt to defend himself or flee.

Jesse James

Jesse began his violent career as a teenager riding with civil war guerrillas led by the ruthless William Clarke Quantrill seeking revenge for atrocities—some real and some imagined—committed by Union loyalists. After the Civil War, Jesse and his brother Frank began a career of banditry famous for its daring and excessive violence. Their notable partnership with the Younger Brothers (Cole, Bob and Jim) marks a rough “high point” in banditry that secured a permanent place for the “James-Younger” gang in the lore of the American West. By 1882, the two gangs had separated. Pressed by increasingly determined government officials and more than 16 years of fugitive life, Jesse was forced to partner with men much less experienced, less loyal to him personally, and imminently more dangerous.

The details of Jesse’s death were well publicized. He “lay in state” for nearly a week. Local, state, and even national newspapers picked up the story and the subsequent trial of the Fords. Local conversation and newspaper editorials argued about the Missouri governor’s behind-the-scenes role in the execution. Public opinion was firmly set against the Fords, branding them not only traitors but cowards. Bob Ford was excoriated in popular opinion and routinely compared with notable traitors of history, particularly Judas Iscariot. John Newman Edwards, editor for the Sedalia *Daily Democrat* and long time supporter of Jesse James wrote, “such a cry of horror and indignation... is... thunder-

¹ Frank Triplett, *The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James* (Stamford, CT: Longmeadow Press, 1992), 224.

ing over the land that if a single of the miserable assassins had either manhood, conscience or courage, he would go, as another Judas, and hang himself.”² Hanging was not unimaginable. Both Bob and Charlie were tried for the murder of James, found guilty, and sentenced to hang; only a pardon by Governor Thomas T. Crittendon kept them from the gallows.

Governor Crittendon had gone on record with his full support of the Fords. In time, Crittendon would deny any support of the actual murder (as opposed, presumably, to the capture) of James. However, his pardon of both Bob and Charlie, many suggested, seemed pre-arranged.³ Certainly Frank Triplett, one of the earliest (and admittedly highly biased) biographers of James, assumed Crittendon had colluded with the Fords, St. Joseph marshal Henry H. Craig, and Clay County sheriff James H. Timberlake to execute James.⁴ Triplett reports secret meetings between the conspirators in Kansas City.⁵ He suggests the Fords entered Jesse’s gang as “undercover” informants for Crittendon; the Governor knew of Jesse’s whereabouts and activities for more than a week before James was finally shot; officials, if they truly sought James’ arrest, could have taken him at any time.⁶

Ford never collected the full amount of Jesse’s bounty and was so hounded he left Missouri. Newspapers and popular sentiment viewed Ford as serpent-like, a fiend, and an enemy of heaven; literally “demonized” by popular opinion, Ford left to become a saloon keeper in Colorado. He was shot in 1892 by Edward O’Kelley.

Public opinion concerning Jesse James, like Ford and Crittendon, was altered by Jesse’s death. Those who opposed Jesse James circulated stories about his involvement in numerous crimes and murders, some on the same day more than 100 miles apart; his supporters and friends denied these charges, some suggesting James had never been involved in any criminal activity. Even death did not end Jesse’s banditry; stories

² William A. Settle, Jr. *Jesse James Was his Name. Or: Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1977), 120.

³ Triplett, 259–261.

⁴ Triplett’s biography of James, published by the end of the year James died (1882), and largely suspected to have been co-written by Jesse’s mother and wife, was the first biography of James. Triplett was highly sympathetic of James and highly critical of Crittendon. There are reasonable suggestions that Crittendon worked to suppress the publication and distribution of the volume.

⁵ Triplett, 225.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

circulated that the man shot as James was an imposter or that James had faked his death or even that he had somehow returned from the grave.

Comparisons of Robert Newton Ford to Judas Iscariot and the “resurrection” of Jesse James clearly intersect with traditions surrounding the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesse is shot from behind, unarmed, without protest, after a meal, partly unrobed, as he stands cruciform against the wall. Jesus is taken unarmed, after a meal, and betrayed / denied by two of his followers. The two were about the same age and died on the same date on the Jewish calendar (April 3, 1882 was 14 Nissan, 5642). Both were hounded by a “foreign” (at least, in James’ case, “Republican”) governor. Both figures divided popular opinion during their careers and in their deaths. Rebel, king, savior, bandit, traitor, scoundrel, criminal or hero depended on one’s perspective.

Missouri during the second half of the nineteenth century was a region fraught with conflict⁷ (for background on Missouri and Kansas, in addition to Settle, 1942 and 1966, see Goodrich 1998). From its early days as a portion of the Louisiana purchase, the territory of Missouri factored into national debates about slavery. Missouri statehood, and the famous “Missouri Compromise” were presented as a means of appeasement, a final effort to avoid open civil war. In a conflict that began with citizens crossing borders to skew local elections, tensions on the Missouri-Kansas border included a number of mutual atrocities. The federal government soon imposed martial law. Though violence was mutual, pressure (and policing) was exerted by pro-union and abolitionist forces upon local pro-slavery secessionists.

Many Missouri residents were sympathetic to secessionist ideas and policies, in part in resistance to Kansas’ abolitionist insurgents. In later years, both Cole and Bob Younger would assert they took up arms to avenge the burning of their family home and serial rape of their mother and sisters. After the war’s end, the offer of general amnesty for combatants affiliated with the confederacy did not extend to guerilla bands. Furthermore, the severity and savagery of their assaults—assaults, it must be remembered, against citizens who were ideologically allied with post-war government and judicial bodies—elicited severe legal

⁷ For background on Missouri and Kansas, see William A. Settle, Jr. “The James Boys and Missouri Politics” *Missouri Historical Review* 36 (July 1942): 412–429 and Thomas Goodrich, *War to the Knife: Bleeding Kansas 1854–1861* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998).

penalty. Unable to hope for any official clemency, members of these guerilla bands who managed to escape capture and immediate hanging were often forced to relocate to neighboring states. Motivated by intense loyalty to their home state of Missouri, many preferred a life on the legal margins—in a way, perpetuating the rebellion—and the risk of capture and capital punishment. Throughout their career as outlaws and bandits, the James-Younger gang would insist their life of crime was foisted upon them by forces beyond their control and was perpetuated by the certainty they would never face a fair hearing.⁸ While incarcerated in the Minnesota State Prison, an elderly Cole Younger described his own sense of mission in precisely these terms.⁹ Even more than 20 years after his last attempted robbery and almost 40 years after the end of the Civil War, Cole continues to identify himself and his compatriots as guerillas.¹⁰

After his death, Jesse James was almost immediately “canonized” as a local resistance hero while Bob Ford was vilified. Yet, debate over the

⁸ The actual crimes of the James-Younger gang may reflect some of the bandit-guerilla quality of their self-understanding. Jesse James was most noted for his bold, daylight robberies of railroad trains, stage coaches and banks. Each of these, while ready suppositories of cash, jewelry and other valuables, were also associated in popular rhetoric with Federal, particularly “Eastern” industries and interests. Bank and train robbery began during the Civil War as Confederate attacks against Pro-Union and Federal organizations; the first ever day-light bank robbery was undertaken by a group of Confederate “special forces” troops. The James-Younger gang perfected a form of brigandage rooted in secessionist guerilla strategies and directed against industries affiliated with Federal control.

⁹ Cole Younger composed “The real facts about the Northfield, Minnesota Bank Robbery (the last and one of the most dramatic robberies attempted by the Younger brothers after their separation from the James gang) in 1901.

¹⁰ For example, see Thomas Cole Younger, “Real Facts About the Northfield, Minnesota Bank Robbery” in *Convict Life at the Minnesota State Prison, Stillwater, Minnesota*, ed. William Casper Heilbron (St. Paul, MN: W.C. Heilbron, 1909), 125–126: “I have only to say that there is no heroism in outlawry, and that the man who sows is sure to reap. After Lee surrendered I tried my best to live at peace with the world and earn a livelihood. I’d been made a guerrilla by a provocation that few men could have resisted. My father had been cruelly murdered, my mother had been hounded to death, my entire family had been tormented and all my relatives plundered and imprisoned.... [The guerilla warrior] was made what he was by such outrages as Osceola, Palmyra and by a hundred raids less famous but not less infamous, that were made by Kansas into Missouri during the war.... As for myself and brothers I wish to emphasize that we made an honest attempt to return to normal life at the close of the war, and had we been permitted to do so the name of Younger would never have been connected with the crimes that were committed in the period immediately following the war.... That my life was good or clean I do not assert. But such as it was, it was forced upon me by conditions over which I had no control.”

James-Younger gang was not simply local. The gubernatorial election of 1876 had brought the James gang to national attention. Republican political rhetoric centered on the general lawlessness of Missouri and noted that the James gang, in particular, was wildly brutal and produced a climate that held external investment in and settlement of Missouri to minimal levels. Democrats countered that, while the James gang were outlaws, they represented a Missouri courage and popular character worthy of admiration. Debate was picked up by Eastern and urban newspapers in both Chicago and Washington, DC where it was read as evidence for further Eastern and Northern supervision. James came to represent, internally, a symbol of Missouri freedom, independence, and courage. Externally, he was a foil for arguments for further governance by outside forces and of the righteous superiority of Republican policies and agencies. James became a cipher in public rhetoric—either a noble, populist brigand resistor of “foreign” rule and economics or a savage robber, thug and serial killer who represented everything wrong with secessionist ideology and allegiance.

Jesus of Nazareth

On the 14th or 15th of Nissan, after dinner, Judas Iscariot led a group of armed men to where an unarmed Jesus and his band were encamped. Signaling to the authorities which man was Jesus by embracing him, Judas’ action became the paradigm of treacherous betrayal (Mk 14:41–46). The gospel writers who follow/use Mark, struggle with Judas’ motivation. Dissatisfied with the paucity of the story, Matthew adds details that have come to define the story of Judas’ betrayal. For Matthew, Judas does it for the money (Mt 26:14–16). Matthew also expands Judas’ story with Judas’ remorse, return of the money and suicide by hanging. Perhaps in answer to the obvious questions Matthew’s account raises—how could Jesus choose a man of such low character to be one of his disciples—Luke and John’s accounts introduce Satan. The devil made Judas do it in Luke in conjunction with the reward money (Lk 22:3–6), and in John in lieu of the reward money (Jn 13:2). The writer of the Gospel of Luke concludes the Judas episode at the beginning of Acts—Judas buys a field, somehow falls down, and bursts apart (Acts 1:16–19). There is a developing oral tradition where Judas’ death gets increasingly more gruesome.¹¹

¹¹ There is one account of Judas’ fate outside of the New Testament. The second cen-

The comparisons between the two men and their movements neither begin nor end with their treacherous deaths. In the Synoptic tradition, Jesus remarks that, taken in the middle of the night by armed men, he is being treated as a *leisten* (Mk 14:48; Mt 26:55, Lk 22:52). The Greek *leisten* means either “robber, highwayman, bandit” or “revolutionary, insurrectionist, guerilla.” Bauer’s *Greek-English Lexicon* cannot, in fact, choose between the meanings in the translation of the gospels.¹² These two meanings slide into each other throughout the first century literature (Josephus, for example). Jesus was crucified—a form of punishment reserved for revolutionaries or bandits—between two revolutionaries / bandits. Jesus was treated as an outlaw.

First century Palestine was a state living under Roman occupation, and a variety of movements and strategies emerged to resist the colonizers. The Galilee, in particular, was a rebellious region. It had a long tradition of resisting any centralized government whether that political influence came from Jerusalem or a foreign empire.¹³ Throughout its history, Galilee was on the margins of the states and empires around it, and the Galileans “had a keen sense of independence, periodically resisting or outright revolting against” any outside control.¹⁴

Bandit bands form in frontiers where there is little centralized political control; where the local social, political, and economic systems have been disrupted often by the attempts of outsiders to establish control; and where the subsequent violence that accompanies such outsider incursions has displaced segments of the populace. This describes the conditions under which the Galileans lived, particularly during the reign of Herod the Great and on into the first century, up to and including the First Jewish Revolt against Rome 66–73 CE. During this period especially, there was a confluence between robbery and revolution. The violence perpetrated by bandits along the Roman roads and Syrian borders were considered crimes against the state. These bands

ture bishop Papias of Hieropolis writes that Judas’ body bloated grotesquely, his excrement was full of pus and worms, and he “died after many tortures and punishments, in a secluded spot which has remained deserted and uninhabited up to our time” due to the malodor that still clung to the area where Judas expired.

¹² Walter A. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d., rev. and ed. by William F. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 594.

¹³ According to the biblical text, the North revolted against Jerusalem during the 10th century; Josephus records unrest under the Hasmonean regime; as well as multiple revolts while Rome attempted to impose its own control over the region

¹⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995), 276.

disrupted the *Pax Romana*, targeted the wealthy and powerful, and raided such state-controlled institutions as grain repositories. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's studies of the general phenomenon of banditry, Horsley calls the marauding activity of these Galileans "social banditry" thus underscoring its political dimension. Social banditry is defined as a "prepolitical and primitive form of social protest" against particular local conditions and injustices.¹⁵ This does not mean every gang was a revolutionary band. For the most part, banditry does not escalate into rebellion because it lacks a unified and inspiring vision of social change. In other words, bandits simply tend to react against and disrupt the status quo, rarely striving towards or enacting an alternative social system.

There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule of banditry, and several of these exceptions can be located in first century Palestine. Along with the Galilee's strong independent streak, there was a long-standing Israelite tradition of charismatic kingship. Unlike Judah, Israel never established a ruling dynasty; kings were charismatic leaders who arose from the general populace and were maneuvered into power. Josephus chronicles at least three politicized bandit gangs emerging in the Galilee in the first century, whose leaders, perhaps harkening back to the Israelite tradition of charismatic monarchy, were proclaimed "king": Judas son of Hezekiah, Simon, and Athronges.¹⁶ These three movements are in addition to John of Gischala—who, while never proclaimed "king," fomented a general peasant rebellion against Rome and the leaders of Jerusalem—and Judas the Galilean who protested the 6 CE census. During the First and Second Jewish Revolts there were also "messianic" figures: Simon bar Giora and Simeon bar Kokhba.

Jesus himself was regarded as a bandit by the governing authorities, and his movement shares many of the key elements of Judas son of Hezekiah. Jesus was the leader of a roving band of Galilean rural poor (note too the number of "revolutionary" names found among Jesus' followers: Judas, Simon the Zealot, and even "Yeshua" himself); he is proclaimed king over and against the rule of both Rome and Jerusalem; and he is taken and executed like any other first-century outlaw. Even

¹⁵ Horsley, 258. See, for more development of the thesis, Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Winston Press, 1985).

¹⁶ As reported in F. Josepus *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.10.5–8. See, as well, Horsley, *Galilee*, 269.

in John, which omits Jesus' remark about being treated as a *leiston*, crowds inspired by Jesus attempted revolution (Jn 6:14–15). Conditions were such in the Galilee that any “stabilized and legitimate definition of ‘law and order’” was lacking.¹⁷ Consequently, “who viewed whom as ‘outlaw’” constituted “a fluid relationship among the people, tradition, and rivals for power in Jerusalem.”¹⁸ In frontier regions during times of war, one man's bandit is another man's revolutionary; and one man's revolutionary is another man's prophet.

The Gospel writers in their own ways associate Jesus with banditry. Clearly Jesus is not robbing, pillaging, and murdering his way across the frontier. However, there was a long-standing tradition equating colonial rule with Satanic rule. As Eric Thurman (influenced by Ched Meyers) argues, Mark, in particular, associates Jesus' contest against Satan with banditry. For example, when Jesus is first questioned about his ability to exorcise demons, he is characterized as an “‘outlaw’ of sorts, breaking and entering into ‘the strong man's house,’ tying him up, plundering property, and so bringing Satan's dominion to an end (Mark 3:22–27).”¹⁹ Jesus the outlaw then, literally, rides into Jerusalem as messiah, and raids the Temple, thus “culminat[ing] his banditlike activity.”²⁰ He even accuses the Temple of being a house of insurrectionists (*leiston* Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46), contrasting his own type of banditry (symbolic and against Satan) with the revolutionary's banditry (violent and against the Roman Empire). Though the difference is clear to Mark and his audience, for the governing authorities of Jerusalem, a bandit was a bandit. With Judas' help, Jesus is taken by armed men in the middle of the night, and crucified amidst the other outlaws.

Crossing Outlaws

“Assassination at the hand of a traitor did much to raise him to heroic standing.”²¹ Young, cut down at the height of their careers, both betrayed by close followers, enmeshed in the political and social unrest of their

¹⁷ Horsley, *Galilee*, 262.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁹ Eric Thurman, “Looking for a few Good Men: Mark and Masculinity,” in *New Testament Masculinities*, eds. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press), 147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

²¹ Settle, *Jesse James*, 123.

day, legends quickly accrued around Jesus and Jesse. Within a week of the death of Jesse James, his home in St. Joseph was opened to the curious public and his fence and stables were dismantled by relic seekers.²² Fearing that the relic hunters would not be content with pieces of wood, Jesse's mother had his grave dug on her farm where his body remained until 1902.²³ When Jesse's body was finally moved to a public cemetery, the obelisk that marked his grave was chipped away until the stone completely disappeared. Even today, a casting of Jesse's bullet-shattered skull sits on display in the front room of his former home, now turned museum. Within a year of his death, a local farmer reported that Jesse had appeared in Clay County.²⁴ Perhaps fueling the legend of Jesse James more than his personal afterlife appearances was his resurrection in American folk ballads, dime novels, and finally the silver screen. Like the Gospels' accounts of post-crucifixion appearances, which could scarcely be more difficult to harmonize, Jesse multiplies after his death.

Both Jesus and Jesse's bi-polar status in popular imagination thwart attempts to discover their "real," historical identity. As betrayed bandits, such identification becomes even more nebulous. "Resurrected" in public memory, they continue to elude capture by posses of historians. The exact specifics of a "historical" Jesse are as difficult to describe as the qualities of any potential "historical" Jesus; this specificity is frustrated most acutely by the remarkably conflicted communities who told stories of their passing and by the glorification of oral traditions. Jesse and Jesus exist, now, in stories. Privy through story to the intimate workings of their mission, even modern hearers of their stories become attuned to their resistance and determined not to be identified with their final betrayers. Sensing the resistance inherent in both Jesus and Jesse, later communities of story-tellers begin to interpret their resistance in ways that awaken freedom, hope, inversion of oppressive power structures, and trickster-like evasion.

In "crossing" these two double-crossed outlaws, we see how similar social dynamics were in play in their resistances and in the oral stories which preserved their memory. It is tempting to ask how the current views of Jesse James might be different if we only had accounts of

²² Ibid., 127.

²³ Ibid., 166.

²⁴ Ibid., 169.

his life and death as written by his “followers” or how we might view Jesus differently if we had contemporary “newspaper” accounts of his exploits. Further, we see how the moment of treacherous death functions to perpetuate the mystique of their appeal. Jesse James and Jesus of Nazareth have become figures larger than history and integral to the identities of entire historical epochs; the romance of their resistance and the potential freedom from “order” and constraint that it inspires, continues to attract devotion.

PART V

GIFT AND SACRIFICE

INTRODUCTION TO PART V

Andrew Wernick

In modern societies the gift, together with the nexus of social relations that surround it, has become a relatively marginal institution. We still encounter gifts in the intimacies of interpersonal life, as well as in ceremonial celebrations such as those that mark the life course, or the birth of a new year. It is also present in voluntary work and in the myriad charities that solicit donations. But the main circulation of wealth is determined by the market and the wage-relation, and the giving, receiving, and exchange of gifts is normatively confined to the personal and private sphere. Administrative and political systems strive to exclude gifts as corruption. Gift-giving itself—one only has to think of Christmas—is readily absorbed into the market economy.

In his celebrated *Essai sur le don*, Marcel Mauss drew from ethnographic reports and ancient religious texts to depict another kind of world entirely. Here, in contrast with the gift-poor world of modernity, we find an archaic form of society in which the gift is central and pervasive. In such societies intricate chains of gift-giving (and counter-giving) determine not only the distribution of wealth, but also, through competitive expenditure, the ranking of households and the legitimacy of tribal rulers. We should not be tempted to idealise all this. Symbolic worlds are cruel. Wedded with patriarchy, the gift also structures kinship systems through the exchange of women themselves regarded as gifts. In any case the gift is ambiguous, it is a challenge as well as a benefit, since the gift must be reciprocated, and if possible exceeded. In gifts and counter-gifts competitive hierarchies establish themselves, including those that emanate from the glories of war. There can indeed be negative gifts—deliberate insults, injuries, thefts, despoliations—themselves eliciting responses ‘with interest’, and terrible feuds. Gift societies are prone to conflict as well as to solidarity. The same mechanism leads to both.

Mauss’s aim was partly genealogical. He wished to demolish the mythical origins that partisans of the free market like Adam Smith had given it. In the beginning was not barter but gift-exchange. At the same time Mauss advanced a provocative hypothesis. The gift (including

derivatives like tribute, rivalry, and sacrifice) is an inextinguishable, indeed constitutive, feature of social life. To the extent, then, that the dynamic of the gift has been suppressed in modern capitalism, this could only be at the price of displacements or of unrelieved tension. Hence the continuing resonance of calls for 'justice'. And hence too, we may surmise (at least in part) the perennial fascination of those ancient books of the Abrahamic faiths that speak to us so insistently of gifts.

The prominence of the gift and its metaphors in these texts is remarkable. The human drama opens, in the Tanakh, with Eve's gift of fruit to Adam. The first murder comes about because God rejects Cain's gift of corn in favor of Abel's gift of a slaughtered goat. The Christian scriptures close with the Judgment in which all outstanding moral credits and debts are finally repaid. The Qur'an as a whole presents itself as an 'uncreated' gift. All three traditions have versions of the story about God's gift of Isaac (or Ishmael, in Islam) to Abraham and Sarah, and the sacrifice back that Abraham obediently prepared. And there are a host of other instances—for example the intriguing incident at the beginning of Judges, surrounding Achsah's dowry, commented on by Stone—which are less pivotal in the narrative, but no less revealing about gifts and their complex place in the worlds portrayed. Not least do they reveal, if read against the grain, the anomalous position of women in a would-be universalist patriarchy—equally subject to the god and its law, but excluded from agency in the gift (and sacrifice) economy because of their own status as gifts.

The gift relation also provides a frame for depicting the relation between God and Human. Gifts to gods has always been a way to conjure them into communication. This acquires a special meaning, though, in the case of a monotheism whose god is the giver of all. For the primal couple, the earth and its creatures is a gift, as is life itself, not to mention life in the garden. Nor is the divine gift a one-time act. In face of the evils that humanity perversely brings on itself, the gifts keep coming. They transpire as helpful or minatory advice, as miraculous interventions, as gifts of Law—whether Torah or Sharia—and even, in the Gospels' Crucifixion, as the sacrificial gift by God of himself. At a more abstract level, finally, one may see in the ethical ideals extolled in these writings a dream of the good that is itself distilled from the gift-economy. On the one side, justice as the perfect state where all reciprocities are in harmony. On the other side, love, compassion and mercy as divine qualities which if emulated would lead to a positively overflowing justice: that happy condition where generosity from all to

all would put the economy of graces given and received into a surplus-generating virtuous circle.

This is not to say that the biblical narratives speak to us from the pristine world of the gift depicted by Mauss. Even their oldest traces bespeak an age when tribal life has been modified and encroached upon by towns, empires, and commerce. Money makes its appearance early in Genesis. The holy peoples who claim descent from Abraham trace their monotheism to a nomad born in a city. From Sumer to Mecca this is a world in transition: still saturated with the gift and its forms, but also beset with troubles arising from gift economies under stress, and from the clash of any such principle with more rationalized modes of exchange and power. That is perhaps why several sacred stories—as for example, Yahweh’s rejection of Cain’s gift of corn, and perhaps the Crucifixion itself in the darkest moment of the Passion—are about gifts that go wrong. Noteworthy also is the paradoxical place of law, on the one hand as a superior ordering device that replaces the escalating vengeance cycles of the gift economy with fixed rules, procedures, and penalties, but on the other hand as itself having the status—and obliging power—of a divine gift.

A related point concerns the centrality in the Abrahamic texts of that particular form of gift—a gift to the god, as a counter-gift for all the gifts received—that we call a sacrifice. The closeness of gift to sacrifice is worth underlining. If the sacrifice is a kind of gift, the gift is also a kind of sacrifice, in which something of oneself, or of the group, is given up and expended. Of course, the greater the gift, and the more from on high, the higher the stakes for the recipient. And that is the dilemma: what gift could be returned to God? Only a blood sacrifice, it seems, or at least something just as precious. Hence the story of Isaac/Ishmael’s near sacrifice by Abraham, and the terrifying Christian amendment in which another father goes through with it to the end. The story of the Akedah, and of religious development more generally, is often thought of in terms of sacrificial substitution—the blood of animals for the blood of humans. But even after this substitution, there remains the counter-gift of life (and death) made by those like Abraham who accept the covenant, and who bind themselves, just as he bound his son, to obedient faith and adhesion to the Law. If Christianity releases from the Law, it is only by trumping human sacrifice with the Cross, which again (‘take up your cross and follow me’) induces its own sacrificial return.

Several of these themes are explored in the succeeding essays. At the

same time they show a deeper point. By attending to ways in which the sacred texts convey, in some fragile detail, some of the contradictory texture of contemporary life, and some of the tactics that make even the most rule bound society a field of play for human agency, a richness is revealed in the Abrahamic scriptures that breaches their own doctrinal, and patriarchal, overcodings.

MARY IN THE QUR'AN: REREADING SUBVERSIVE BIRTHS

Aisha Geissinger

Among the most gripping narratives in the Qur'an is the retelling of the story of Jesus' birth in Sūra Maryam (S. 19, "Mary").¹ In it, Mary is depicted giving birth to Jesus in the wilderness. Labouring alone and unassisted, she grips the trunk of a palm tree for support, lamenting, "I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before this!"

Why does the Qur'an depict the birth of Jesus in this way? What textual purposes does it serve? In order to address these questions, this essay presents a literary rereading of Q 19:2–33. First, it will be demonstrated that this passage retells the story of Jesus' birth in a way which is designed to highlight its seemingly scandalous nature. Second, it will be shown that the theme of a birth which apparently violates social norms also appears in the quranic retellings of the story of the infancy of Moses, and that the Qur'an in fact connects these two stories. Finally, reasons for the text's rather surprising focus on births of this type will be suggested.

A Note on Methodology

From a literary perspective, the Qur'an has been characterized in two main ways: as an often obscure text which frequently lacks a coherent structure,² and as a text, structured in complex ways, which can be studied using modern literary analytical methods.³ In this essay, the latter view is adopted, and the discussion which follows builds on the work of those who have already demonstrated that Q 19 has a coherent literary structure.⁴

¹ The quranic text is divided into 114 sūras, or chapters of varying length.

² See for example: John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 46–47.

³ For examples of scholarly studies based on this latter view of the Qur'an, cf: *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, ed. Issa Boullata (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).

⁴ Cf.: Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 146–148; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1981), 269–270, 301.

The Qur'an's presentation of Mary has been extensively studied from a critical academic perspective. Yet, her stark aloneness as she gives birth to Jesus in Q 19 has barely been noticed, because all quranic materials about Mary are usually read together, often with the assumption that it conveys one story or set of ideas about her. However, when one sets the two main quranic narratives about Mary (Q 3:33–49 and Q 19:2–33) side by side, it is clear that they differ significantly.

While medieval Muslim exegetes generally harmonize these two narratives, they nonetheless also follow the traditional dating, which associates Sūra Maryam with the early Meccan period and Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (Q 3, "The Family of Imran") with post-*hijra*⁵ Medina—which are presented in Muslim traditional sources as markedly different phases in Muhammad's career.⁶ If Sūra Maryam does in fact date from the Meccan phase, while Sūrat Āl 'Imrān is Medinan, then the story of Mary as it is told in Q 19 was presumably recited and heard independently of its retelling in Q 3 for several years at least. Given the existence of such traditions, I would argue that the story in Q 19 can be read and analyzed separately from Q 3. Barbara Stowasser suggests that "[t]hese traditions may give an inkling not only of the chronology of the sequential Qur'anic segments of Mary's story but also of early Muslim perceptions of the unfolding story's import."⁷ In this essay, some of the implications of this suggestion will be explored. Moreover, as it appears that the story in Q 19 was recited, heard and understood at an early stage with reference to the infancy stories of Moses, this essay also briefly examines the quranic retellings of the latter which appear in Sūra Ṭāhā (Q 20, "TaHa") and in Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ (Q 28, "The Story"), also traditionally dated to the Meccan period.

It must be stressed that the goal here is not to resolve any of the ongoing controversies about dating,⁸ nor about the origins of quranic portrayals of figures which are also found in the biblical tradition.⁹

⁵ I.e. following Muhammad's migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE

⁶ For the traditional stories associated with these two narratives, cf. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 150–153, 270–277.

⁷ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

⁸ For a discussion of the issues involved in dating quranic passages, cf. Robinson, *Discovering*, 76ff.

⁹ The expression "biblical tradition" is used here in the widest possible sense, not only including materials found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament,

The stories about Mary and the infancy of Moses are discussed in this essay as narratives in their own right, which were reshaped in particular ways in order to address Muhammad's audience.¹⁰ In examining such reshaping, it will be assumed that Q 19 both presupposes that its audience knows of late antique traditions which present Jesus' conception as "illegitimate,"¹¹ and that traditions of this type were reworked in the quranic text with particular theological aims in mind. Finally, Mary in Q 19 is approached here as an "intertextual figure," meaning that it is not assumed that the text aims to portray one, discrete "historical" person. Rather, Q 19 draws upon and reinterprets a variety of traditions and ideas in circulation about Mary of Nazareth, as well as about other figures with the same or similar name from biblical tradition, most notably, Miriam, sister of Aaron and Moses.¹²

Q 19:2–33¹³

2. This an account of your Lord's grace towards His servant Zachariah,
3. when he called to his Lord secretly, saying,
4. 'Lord, my bones have weakened and my hair is ashen grey, but never, Lord, have I ever prayed to You in vain:
5. I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] when I am gone, for my wife is barren, so grant me a successor—a gift from You
6. to be my heir and the heir of the family of Jacob. Lord, make him well pleasing [to You].'
7. 'Zachariah, We bring you good news of a son whose name will be John—We have chosen this name for no one before him.'

but also works such as non-canonical gospels, as well as written and oral traditions expounding and elaborating on these.

¹⁰ For examples of this approach to quranic stories, cf: Marilyn Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 75.1 (1985), 1–16; Walid Saleh, "'What if you refuse, when ordered to fight?' King Saul (Ṭālūt) in the Qur'an and Post-Quranic Literature," in *Saul in Story and Tradition*, ed. Carl S. Ehrlich (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 261–283.

¹¹ For a study of traditions of this type, cf: Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹² For the concept of an "intertextual figure," cf: Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Jesus' Gnostic Mom: Mary of Nazareth and the 'Gnostic Mary' Traditions," in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre Good (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 159–160.

¹³ The translation used here is *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), except where otherwise noted.

8. He said, 'Lord, how can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am old and frail?'
9. He said, 'This is what your Lord has said: "It is easy for Me: I created you, though you were nothing before."'
10. He said, 'Give me a sign, Lord.' He said, 'Your sign is that you will not [be able to] speak to anyone for three full [days and] nights.'
11. He went out of the sanctuary to his people and signaled to them to praise God morning and evening.
12. [We said], 'John, hold on to the Scripture firmly.' While he was still a boy, We granted him wisdom,
13. tenderness from Us, and purity. He was devout,
14. kind to his parents, not domineering or rebellious.
15. Peace was on him the day he was born, the day he died, and it will be on him the day he is raised to life again.
16. Mention in the Qur'an the story of Mary. She withdrew from her family to a place in the east
17. and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a perfected man.
18. She said, 'I seek the Lord of Mercy's protection against you: if you have any fear of Him [do not approach]!'
19. but he said, 'I am but a messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of a pure son.'
20. She said, How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste.' (lit. '...I am not a whore')¹⁴
21. and he said, 'This is what your Lord said: "It is easy for Me—We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us."' And so it was ordained:
22. she conceived him. She withdrew to a distant place.
23. and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, 'I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!'
24. but a voice cried to her from below, 'Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet
25. and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you,
26. so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: "I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today."'
27. She went back to her people carrying the child, and they said, 'Mary! You have done something terrible!
28. Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man; your mother was not unchaste!' (lit. '...nor was your mother a whore')
29. She pointed at him. They said, 'How can we converse with is an infant?'

¹⁴ My literal translation of this phrase here and in v. 28 follows Stowasser's; cf.: *Women*, 70.

30. But he said: 'I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet;
31. made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live,
32. to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless.
33. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.'

This story is characterized by a brief, spare narrative style, with little description of the setting. Instead, the emphasis is on the words and actions of the characters. It is told in rhymed prose, and when it is recited, most of the verses end with the sound *-iyyā*. The aural similarity between the *-iyyā* verse-endings and the Arabic feminine suffix *-iyya*¹⁵ helps evoke associations with femaleness, and gives the recited text a gentle and compassionate tone overall.

This unusual verse-ending (which is found in no other quranic narrative) also ties the stories of Zachariah and Mary together, underlining their parallel aspects for the reciter/audience: Both Zachariah and Mary receive annunciations, and when they initially express doubt on the grounds that the birth of the promised son is physically impossible, each receives a similar response. Both Zachariah and Mary are rendered temporarily unable to communicate with others, except with gestures. The descriptions of John and Jesus given here are also strikingly similar. This passage's parallel structure can be outlined as follows:

Zachariah's story		Mary's story	
v. 2	introductory statement	v. 16	introductory statement
v. 3–6	prays for an heir in secret		
		v. 16	withdraws from her family
v. 7	annunciation	v. 17–19	annunciation
v. 8–9	expresses doubts	v. 20	expresses doubts
v. 10	asks for a sign; silenced		
		v. 22	conceives and withdraws
		v. 23	gives birth
		v. 24–26	is fed; instructed not to speak
		v. 27–28	is reproached by her people
v. 11	exhorts people by gesturing	v. 29	gestures in response
v. 12–15	description of John	v. 30–33	Jesus' self-description

¹⁵ I.e. with the letters *yā'-tā' marbūṭa*.

As this outline makes clear, the text sets up parallels between Zachariah and Mary on one hand, and John and Jesus on the other. While such parallelism is also to be found in the Gospel of Luke,¹⁶ its function in Q 19 serves a very different theological purpose: asserting that Jesus' miraculous conception does not indicate that he is divine.¹⁷ After all, John's conception also occurs despite what would seem to be insurmountable biological barriers of old age and infertility. Zachariah's story as retold here echoes many of the same themes of the quranic retellings of the angelic announcement of the birth of Isaac to Abraham (Q 15:51–56), to his wife (Q 11:69–73) as well as to both parents (Q 51:24–30), which also feature old age, barrenness, and the "good news" of offspring. Miraculous conceptions in the Qur'an demonstrate God's creative power: "When [God] decrees something, He says only, 'Be,' and it is" (Q 19:35).

Yet, the parallels between the stories of Zachariah and Mary in Q 19:2–33 also call the attention of the reciter/audience to the marked differences between them: Zachariah fervently desires an heir, hoping that this would secure his position in relation to his kin. He prays in privacy, movingly expressing his longing and the difficulties of his situation: "Lord, my bones have weakened, and my hair is ashen grey, but never, Lord, have I ever prayed to You in vain: I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] when I am gone..." (v. 4–5). When Zachariah receives the divine promise of a son, his doubting question and request for a sign vividly express the depth of his longing; he hardly dares to hope that what he has desired for so long will finally come to pass. The "sign" that he receives is his inability to speak for several days, yet this seemingly does not dampen his exhilaration; he gestures to his people to glorify God. The story ends on a joyful note, with the description of John emphasizing that this son turned out to be everything that Zachariah could have wanted, if not more.

By contrast, Mary's annunciation does not bring her welcome news. Nowhere is it suggested that she expects to become a mother in the near future, much less that she has been prayerfully longing for a child. Her question to the angel—"How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I am not a whore" (v. 20)—emphasizes that she is an

¹⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 248–249; Schaberg, 101ff.

¹⁷ Stowasser, 67–68.

unmarried virgin, and more ominously, it also foreshadows the censure that she (unlike Zachariah) will receive as the result of this miraculous birth. In Zachariah's story, there is no description of the conception or birth of his son, and the pregnant and labouring body of the boy's mother is textually absent. But in Mary's story, her lonely labour and delivery are movingly, even hauntingly depicted. And while Mary, like Zachariah, also communicates with her people through gestures, both the reason for her silence and what she is attempting to convey are very different.

"She withdrew from her family..."

In Q 19, Mary is strikingly alone for the most part. Significantly, there is no suggestion in this passage that there are any familial or social connections between her and Zachariah, although as we have seen, their stories unfold here in parallel. Mary first withdraws from her family to an unspecified place in the east (v. 16). When her solitude is interrupted by the angel, her response hints at her apprehension that he intends to try to seduce or harm her. Mary's seeking of refuge with God underlines her gendered vulnerability, as a woman alone with no family to protect her. After Mary conceives, she withdraws to a yet more distant place.

However, it is when she gives birth that the portrayal of Mary's isolation is at its most extreme. With no human being to assist her, she labours, clinging to a tree for support. Giving birth outdoors in a lonely place, Mary is presented as an outcast—an impression that is reinforced by her exclamation, "I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!" This depiction evokes the circumstances under which an unwed mother might deliver a child.

Mary's isolation is then attenuated somewhat by the voice's reminder of the divinely-bestowed provisions—water from the stream, and dates from the palm-tree—near at hand, and further by the intimation that she will soon encounter other people. However, as she is instructed not to converse with anyone, she paradoxically remains a solitary and vulnerable figure: When her people confront her, she can only gesture. It is only when Jesus speaks, publicly acknowledging her as his mother and declaring his devotion to her, that Mary is no longer alone. But the text does not recount her people's reaction.

The structuring of Q 19:16–33 around Mary's increasing withdrawal from human society, with a corresponding increase in narrative tension

as her isolation (and vulnerability) increases, followed by her gradual but seemingly incomplete reintegration underlines the centrality of her aloneness to this story's retelling. The story has a chiastic structure:¹⁸

- A. Mary withdraws from her family (16–17a)
- B. Annunciation, with angel taking the form of a man (17b–19)
- C. Mary questions how she can have a son—“...I am not a whore” (20)
- D. Withdrawal to a distant place (22)
- E. Delivery under a palm tree; wishes for oblivion (23)
- E'. Palm tree provides sustenance (24–26a)
- D'. Instructions on what to do if she meets anyone (26b)
- C'. Reproved by her people—“nor was your mother a whore” (27–28)
- B'. The infant Jesus speaks like an adult (30–31)
- A'. Jesus proclaims his regard for his mother (32)

A comparison of Q 19:16–33 with parallel passages in early Christian writings makes the former's emphasis on Mary's aloneness even more apparent. For example, in the Gospel of Luke as well as the *Protevangelium of James*, the pregnant Mary decorously pays an extended visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth, wife of Zachariah (Lk. 1:40ff.; *Prot.* 12:2–3). Nor does either of these texts depict Mary labouring or giving birth alone.

“I am not a whore”

The word “whore” (*baghiyy*) is, as we have seen, repeated no less than twice in this short passage. A comparison between Q 19:20 and its canonical gospel parallel: “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Lk. 1:34) could suggest that this choice of words might be simply intended to preserve the rhyme scheme. Yet, assonances are not uncom-

¹⁸ I.e. a circular shape, in which the tensions developed in the first part of the story are resolved in reverse order. The Joseph story (Q 12) also has this structure; cf. Gary Rendsburg, “Literary Structures in the Qur'anic and Biblical Stories of Joseph,” *The Muslim World* 78.2 (1988), 118–120.

mon in the Qur'an,¹⁹ and there are two in this passage alone.²⁰ This repetition of *baghiyy* is all the more striking given that the word rarely appears in the Qur'an; in fact, these are the only two instances that it is used.²¹ Moreover, in the Qur'an this word is associated with female slaves in particular—"Do not force your slave-girls into prostitution (*bighā'*)...." (Q 24:33)

This repetition of the word *baghiyy* highlights the paradox underlying Q 19:16–33. On one hand, a seventh century Arabian audience would see that Mary is presented here as though she is a *hurra*, or a free woman from a powerful family. In classical Arabic poetry, the *hurra's* elite status is underlined by references to her chastity, seclusion and inaccessibility to unrelated males—in marked contradistinction to the slave or captive woman.²² The passage emphasizes Mary's seclusion and chastity. In short, she is not a "whore," meaning that she is not a woman whose abject social position makes her proverbially likely to bear a child out of wedlock.²³

Yet, as the story unfolds, Mary's chaste seclusion becomes far more akin to vulnerable isolation. Bereft of familial protection or support, she labours and gives birth in the open, exposed to the elements, as well as presumably to the gaze of any passer-by. Finally, her kin virtually disown her—"Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man, nor was your mother a whore." Yet despite all this, the text insists that Mary's blamelessness and honoured position is obvious, although it only provides what a seventh century Arabian audience would regard as highly dubious evidence at best—the miraculous speech of her infant.

Interestingly, this is in striking contrast to the evident attempts made in several early Christian texts to remove any lingering doubts that the

¹⁹ For verse endings and assonance in the Qur'an, cf: Robinson, 11–12.

²⁰ See verses 31 and 33 (which both end in *ḥayy^m*).

²¹ This is evidently not because the root from which it is derived (b-gh-ā) is uncommon in quranic Arabic. For example, the verb *baghā* (to act unlawfully and unjustly) is found in a number of passages; for a discussion of this verb, see: Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 146–148.

²² Cf.: Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 11.

²³ Some classical philological authorities argue that the word *baghiyy* means any female slave, because such women have a reputation for engaging in "illicit" acts; cf: Abū al-Faḍl Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2000) ii, 121–122.

reader/audience might have. For example, Joseph's initial skepticism followed by belief, and then his willingness to function as the social father of Jesus once he is born provides both a testimony to the miracle from a putative witness, as well as an emotively compelling model of doubt followed by conviction. But Joseph is absent from Q 19, as we have seen. Even more dramatically, the *Protevangelium* presents graphic proof of Mary's virginity: not only does she successfully pass the test meant to unmask an adulterous wife (*Prot.* 16:2; cf. Num. 5:11ff.), but her hymen is found to be intact when she is later examined by two skeptical midwives (*Prot.* 19:1ff.). Yet in Q 19, the accusations of Mary's kin receive no such decisive refutation.

"O sister of Aaron"

Fascinatingly, the birth of Jesus is not the only birth which is associated with scandal in the Qur'an. When Mary's kin begin their reproaches by addressing her as "sister of Aaron," they inadvertently highlight the parallels between Jesus' birth and the story of Moses' infancy. In this rather ironic turn of events, the scandalous image of Mary giving birth to a fatherless child by a stream in the wilderness—"your Lord has provided a stream at your feet" (Q 19:24)—is assimilated to the venerable image of Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, standing by the river keeping watch over her infant brother.

The story of Moses' infancy first appears in the Qur'an as a flashback in one recounting of God's call to Moses to go and preach to Pharaoh in Q 20:24–43. Moses protests that he does not speak well, and asks that his eloquent brother Aaron be sent along with him, so that the mission is more likely to be successful. God accedes to this request, and then reminds Moses:

37. Indeed We showed you favour before.
38. We inspired your mother, saying,
39. "Put your child into the chest, then place him in the river. Let the river wash him on to its bank, and he will be taken in by an enemy of Mine and his. I showered you with My love and planned that you should be reared under My watchful eye.
40. Your sister went out, saying, "I will tell you someone who will nurse him," then We returned you to your mother so that she could rejoice and not grieve....

In this passage, the sister of Moses plays the role of protector of an apparently fatherless infant. She offers her mother's services as wet-nurse to the unsuspecting "enemy," making it possible for Moses to be breast-fed by his birth-mother. In this way, the divine plan that he be raised among his own people ultimately prevails even when its realization seems impossible.

In its second, more detailed quranic retelling in Q 28:7–13, the story of Moses' infancy is preceded by a brief yet evocative description of the oppression of the Israelites: "Pharaoh made himself high and mighty in the land and divided the people into different groups: one group he oppressed, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women" (Q 28:4). The mother and sister of the next great prophet, Moses, have no male protector, which hints at their sexual vulnerability and abjection. Yet, the divine will that these positions of Pharaoh and the Israelites will be reversed prevails regardless, through the actions of these two Israelite women:

7. We inspired Moses' mother, saying, 'Suckle him, and then, when you fear for his safety, put him in the river: do not be afraid, and do not grieve, for We shall return him to you and make him a messenger.'
8. Pharaoh's household picked him up—later to become an enemy and a source of grief for them: Pharaoh, Haman, and their armies were wrongdoers—
9. and Pharaoh's wife said, 'Here is a joy to behold for me and for you! Do not kill him: he may be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' They did not realize what they were doing.
10. The next day, Moses' mother felt a void in her heart—if We had not strengthened it to make her one of those who believe, she would have revealed everything about him—
11. and she said to his sister, 'Follow him.' So she watched him from a distance, without them knowing.
12. We had ordained that he would refuse to feed from wet nurses. His sister approached them and said, 'Shall I tell you about a household which could bring him up for you and take good care of him?'
13. We restored him to his mother in this way, so that she might be comforted, not grieve, and know that God's promise is true, though most of them do not know.

This retelling of the story has an even more noticeable focus on the mother's emotions than Q 20:40, which gives it a particularly gentle tone (cf. Ex. 2:1ff.). As we have seen, this is also a noteworthy feature of the story of Mary in Q 19. And, similarly, this story of Moses' infancy is also about a forbidden birth—"illegitimate," in a sense—because Pharaoh, the all-powerful patriarch, does not allow any Israelite male

infant to live. This retelling of the story is redolent with birth imagery: The child's mother places him in a small, enclosed container and puts him into the water, which mirrors infanticide by drowning, but is also a symbolic return to the womb. Moses is then drawn out of the water, (re)born.

Meanwhile, the infant's sister is secretly watching. This covert action of hers gives concrete form to Moses' mother's concern for her child. When Moses refuses the milk of any wet nurse, his sister volunteers to find one that he will accept. Had she not done so, the baby would presumably have either starved to death, or taken milk from a woman of Pharaoh's household.

At first glance, it might seem that Moses' sister has thus facilitated the child's (re)birth as the adopted son of the ruler who has enslaved his people. Moses' survival under these conditions could be perceived as a victory for Pharaoh, analogous to the ultimate patriarchal expression of victory (familiar from both the biblical tradition as well as seventh century Arabia), in which the women of the defeated enemy are enslaved, taken into concubinage, and finally compelled to give birth to children fathered by the slayers of their menfolk.

But in reality, this (re)birth only deceives Pharaoh; the reciter/audience knows that Moses' lineage and identity have not in fact been compromised. In the Qur'an, mere adoption does not create any family tie (Q 33:4). But breast-feeding can bring about foster-relationships, and these, once created, are permanent.²⁴ The initiative of Moses' sister not only becomes the means through which God's promise to his mother is fulfilled, but also ensures that a foster-relationship is not formed between Moses and anyone in Pharaoh's household. Despite appearances, the infant actually remains a complete outsider in the palace.

Irony and Legitimacy

Both the infancy stories of Moses in Q 20 and Q 28 and the story of Mary in Q 19 depict infants whose very existence is deemed "illegitimate" by the holders of patriarchal power. While the reciter/audience can readily see why they might be perceived in that way—Jesus' mother

²⁴ The Qur'an forbids a man to ever marry a woman who has breast-fed him, and any girl who had been breast-fed by that woman as well, just as it bans his marriage to his mother or sister (Q 4:23).

is unmarried, and Moses was supposed to have been killed at birth—the quranic text nonetheless insists that such conventional notions of “legitimacy” are obviously wrong in these two cases. The text does not concede that Pharaoh is simply exercising the patriarchal prerogatives of an ancient ruler, but presents him as an unjust tyrant. Nor is it admitted in Q 19 that doubts might understandably be entertained about Jesus’ conception. In fact, the text clearly sides with both Mary and the mother and sister of Moses, presenting their situations and dilemmas sympathetically, in ways which appeal to the emotions of the reciter/audience.

Why this textual focus on births which are seemingly—but clearly not actually—“illegitimate”? Both Jesus and Moses are depicted in the Qur’an as links in a long chain of prophets, sent by God to deliver a monotheistic message to humanity. Yet, both men’s place in this prophetic line (and hence, their “legitimacy”) is in doubt: Moses not only lacks eloquence, but Pharaoh dismisses the divine signs he brings as sorcery (Q 20:56–57). Jesus’ conception is, as we have seen, either not recognized as miraculous, or is “misrecognized” by Christians as proof that he is divine. Muhammad is presented in the Qur’an as the latest link in this prophetic chain, yet the divine sign he brings—the revelations that he recites—are scoffed at and rejected by most of his contemporaries. Neither he nor his fledgling group of followers is accorded legitimacy by the pagan Meccan tribal elders, who regard his message as an “illegitimate” departure from the ways of the ancestors. The subversion of patriarchal notions of “legitimacy” in Q 19 is a mordant comment on such rejection. Mary’s kin did not perceive her innocence, yet God had provided irrefutable proof in the shape of Jesus’ miraculous speech, which should have decisively convinced them. Likewise, Muhammad’s revelations ought to be proof enough in themselves of both their divine origins and the truth of his message.

Afterword

It should be noted that the portrayal of a painfully alone and outcast Mary in Q 19 is not the image which came to be accepted and elaborated by classical Qur’an exegetes. While Mary’s image in works of classical quranic interpretation is a complex topic beyond the scope of this essay, three important factors should be noted here: First, the story of Mary in Q 19 was read in light of its retelling in Q 3:33–49, in part because

Q 3 comes first in the quranic text's canonical order. Second, Mary's story as it appears in Q 19 was read in light of Zachariah's story which immediately precedes it, in such a way that any intimations of scandal were muted. And third, Christian nativity stories were selectively drawn upon by exegetes in order to complete this process. For instance, Joseph is inserted into the story in classical exegetical works.

These developments, both in the quranic text itself and in exegesis, indicate that stories about Mary have had differing significances attributed to them at various points in early Muslim history. Mary's story in Q 19, with its themes of isolation and scandal, would soon be retold in order to express a different image of her. In Q 3, Mary is neither alone nor unprotected; after the *hijra*, Muhammad was able to establish a polity in Medina, and he and his message became a force which could no longer be dismissively ignored by his contemporaries.

SARAH'S GIFT: GENDER, AGENCY, AND THE SACRED

Magda Romanska

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida attempts to outline the economy of self-sacrifice that he sees at the heart of Western Judeo-Christian ethics, tracing it predominantly to the “double gift of death” between Abraham/Isaac and God/Jesus. In the two stories, death is a *locus mundi* where faith and responsibility solidify their meaning. Derrida writes:

Responsibility and faith go together, however paradoxical that might seem to some, and both should, in the same movement, exceed mastery and knowledge. The gift of death would be this marriage of responsibility and faith.¹

The majority of religious scholars agree that the purpose of the sacrifice of Isaac, the Akedah, is a declaration of faith, “sanctification of the divine name (Kiddush Ha-Shem).”² Abraham’s actions, they believe, are incomparable to previous human sacrifices (such as described in Greek mythology) because they were performed either “for the good of their nation, or to appease the Gods, or in times of wars, of droughts and flood and pestilences, to make atonement for their countries,”³ whereas “Abraham served his Creator out of love, with his whole heart.”⁴ Because it was done for no other ulterior motive but pure love of God, Abraham’s obedience to God’s commandment... is an expression of faith.”⁵ It is the unquestionable obedience that marks Abraham as an ethical person worthy of a covenant with the divine. “It is only... with Abraham that God ‘concludes a covenant.’”⁶ Faith, obedience, law, and

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6.

² Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (Philadelphia: Pantheon Books, 1963), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ Louis A. Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 115.

⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981), 204.

responsibility converge under the umbrella of a sacred exchange: God exists insofar as he is obeyed.

The modern philosophy adopted Abraham as a synonym of “fear and trembling.” Kierkegaard sees the Akedah as the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son, and thus to transgress his own commandment “thou shall not kill,” by declaring that he must kill. Between his ethical allegiance to his son and his teleological allegiance to God, who simultaneously asks him to kill and not to kill, Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, experiences the horror of moral aporia that can be transcended only by a complete rejection of God or by a leap of faith. By going up on Mount Moriah, Kierkegaard writes, Abraham “left one thing behind, took one thing with him: he left his earthly understanding behind him and took his faith with him—otherwise he would have wandered forth but would have thought this unreasonable.”⁷ Many Judaic scholars have argued that Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the Akedah as a choice between human and divine law is a strictly Christian interpretation. They specifically object to Kierkegaard’s suggestion that by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is ready to “abandon every principle of morality.” Such an interpretation suggests that to obey God means to be immoral. God cannot ask one to do the unethical, because God *is* the ethical.

Derrida sees Abraham’s story in light of both traditions, Christian and Jewish, as both a mystery, *mysterium tremendum*, and an ethical paradox. What connects the two interpretations is the economy of the sacrificial exchange: death functions as an axis around which the mechanisms of faith, responsibility, and ethics fashion Abraham as an ethical subject. Reading Abraham’s story alongside that of the crucifixion of Christ, Derrida draws a parallel between the two sacrificial contracts: both God and Man sacrifice their sons for each other: man to prove his devotion to God, and God to save man from eternal damnation. Without Abraham’s sacrifice, there is no sacrificial responsibility, no economy of the gift of death; in fact, without the sacrifice, there is no God. The Akedah, the binding of Isaac, has a double meaning: literally, it represents the binding of Isaac to the altar; symbolically, it operates within the sacrificial economy of the gift of death that binds man and God.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, “A Panegyric Upon Abraham,” in *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), 31.

Derrida's concept of "gift" follows from Mauss's theory of the potlatch; the gift-giving always functions under the assumption of reciprocity: "the potlatch must be returned with interest like all other gifts, . . . The sanction for the obligation to repay is enslavement for debt."⁸ According to Mauss, there is no gift as such in itself: there is only the meaning of the gift, its symbolic function that binds the giver and the receiver in the bonds of reciprocity. The gift is what the gift does; it is the impossible, "the secret . . . that there is no Secret."⁹ A gift veils its own negativity in the rhetoric of mutuality. In the economy of self-sacrifice, the symbolic enslavement to the terms of reciprocity of these *for* whom the suicide dies is the measure of the power of his death: the degree of his posthumous veneration.¹⁰ The gift of death is given with the presumption that the recipient will be forced to accept it and, thus, to repay it.

Christ dies *for* others, but, Derrida points out, this gift of death functions only on the rhetorical level; it is an impossible. One cannot die in anyone else's place, one cannot die *for* anyone, and God cannot die *for* man, *in his place*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes an explicit point: "*No one can take the other's dying away from him. . . .* Insofar as it is, death is always essentially my own" (§47).¹¹ Derrida elaborates on this Heideggerian theme, pointing out that die *for* someone would mean to make him/her immortal: "Only a mortal can give . . . to what is mortal since he can give everything except immortality, everything except salvation as immortality."¹² Indeed, with the death of his son who dies *for* man, God grants man the eternal immortality of his soul, post-mortal salvation. But this immortality, like Socrates' deathbed discourse on the eternal soul, is rhetorical. One cannot experience death and then come out on the other side, just as one cannot die for anyone else. The gift of death (dying for someone or something) has only symbolic significance. It functions only on the level of signifiers. The gift of death, and thus

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West LTD, 1969), 42–43.

⁹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 19.

¹⁰ A. Alvarez suggests that in some primitive societies, the idea of self-sacrifice itself has a kind of magical quality: "it is as though [the suicide] were committed in the certain belief that the suicide himself would not really die. Instead, he is performing a magical act which will initiate a complex but equally magic ritual ending in the death of his enemy." *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Norton, 1990), 67.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 223.

¹² Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 41–43.

the impossibility of death as possibility, signifies the paradoxical nature of language (and ethics) that signifies nothing beyond itself, nothing beyond the self *in-itself*. Western ethics of faith and responsibility are founded on the rhetoric of the eternal soul and mortal body because it is only through the rhetoric of the eternal soul that the economy of the gift of death can fulfill its symbolic function. The discourse of the immortal soul marks the sacrifice as breaking point between humanity and Godliness. The sacred is a function of the gift of death.

Thus Derrida suggests that within the economy of the sacred,

the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude.¹³

In between the absolute responsibility to the divine and moral responsibility to the other, ethics are the choices between two absolute irresponsibilities. Faith is a response to aporia, and sacrifice a function of faith. The sacred resides in the space between faith and responsibility: in between the aporia and the paradox. In fact, at the limits of logic, God, whose commands contradict each other, *is* the aporia, the paradox, and the scandal. The transcendence is the leap into aporia, the leap beyond the limits of human intelligibility. At the crossroads between two responsibilities, to the absolute and the ethical, to the sacred and the profane, man is left alone with the supreme responsibility that is always already *a priori* irresponsible.

Since the Akedah is incomparable to anything else performed for the sake of God, it is the exemplar of an ethical action, with Abraham becoming the exemplar of an ethical subject. Hence, the Akedah is a contract between the male and the divine, and only the male gains the status of an ethical subject. What is, then, the place of the feminine in the economy of the sacred? What is the place of the feminine in the aporia of faith and responsibility? What is the place of the feminine in the gift of death? And, finally, what is the place of the feminine in the structure of ethics? In Abraham's story, Derrida points out, there is no mention of woman:

Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced,

¹³ Ibid., 68.

if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double "gift of death" imply at its very basis an exclusion of woman or sacrifice of woman? A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other?¹⁴

Derrida does not answer himself, leaving this question "in suspense," but it is this question that demands to be answered if we are to understand the ethics of "heterosexual fatality"¹⁵ and the economy of the sacrificial exchange that defines the relationship between femininity and the sacred: How would "the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law" be "altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced" if woman were asked to perform *her* sacrificial duty? What is the relationship between the woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman?

In Abraham's story, Sarah knows nothing about the sacrifice, and, as Berman notices, "there does not seem to be a single known midrash that suggests Abraham consulted her or had advised her of his momentous journey."¹⁶ Would the Western ethics of sacrificial responsibility and its gender relations be different if Sarah had been asked directly by God to perform *her* sacrificial responsibility? Berman suggests that it is narrative necessity that excludes Sarah from the sacrificial exchange:

Perhaps Sarah's innocence of Abraham's intent, as well as Isaac's innocence until the last moment, adds to the suspense and mystery and are therefore necessary ingredients of the story as a suspenseful, compelling story.¹⁷

For Berman, the narrative structure alone warrants Sarah's exclusion. But besides the narrative structure, the story also has a performative quality; it establishes the ethical relationship between Abraham and God, the covenant from which Sarah is excluded. One can ask whether the exclusion of Sarah is necessary to retain the narrative suspense or whether the narrative suspense is necessary to exclude Sarah. Would it be possible to maintain the same narrative suspense if Sarah was spoken to by God and Abraham remained ignorant? The lack of knowledge precludes the access to the divine that bestows laws, blessings, and

¹⁴ Ibid., 75–76.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 72.

¹⁶ Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*, 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

guidance. As Phyllis Tribble puts it, "Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham."¹⁸ God does not address those whom he does not wish to test, and he does not test those in whom he has no stake, whose response is either predictable or irrelevant.

In the patriarchal structure of the sacred, it appears, woman cannot be asked by God to participate in the sacrificial contract, because if she did as Abraham did and sacrificed Isaac without a shadow of doubt, like Abraham she would declare her love of God, thus cementing her position as an ethical subject capable of facing and transcending the moral aporia of faith and responsibility. Instead, Sarah

does not share in her husband's glory. She has no chance here or anywhere else in her story to prove herself a woman of conspicuous faith and obedience; God has made no demands of *her*.¹⁹

Sarah's participation in the economy of the gift would make her equal to man "within the implacable universality of the law." If, however, she doubted God's voice and refused to sacrifice Isaac, faced with her doubt, Abraham's action would seem "unreasonable." Choosing between the ethical and the teleological, she would choose the ethical, and without *her* leap of faith, or without her trust, God would cease to be. For God to exist and for man to maintain his patriarchal superiority over woman in relationship with God, Sarah must be excluded from the sacrificial exchange. God's and man's sacrificial contract binds them together in the sacred letter of the law, privileging man as having both the access to the divine and the right—by virtue of his faith, which he professes through his willingness to sacrifice his son—to act on God's behalf to bestow the divine laws, including those that regulate gender relations. The exclusion of woman from the sacred economy creates a condition of sacred imperialism, whereas woman's agency as an ethical subject *vis-à-vis* the divine is erased. Man allows God to rule him; in exchange, God gives man the right to rule woman.

Many scholars have pointed out that one common and fundamental characteristic of most patriarchal stories is "the personal relationship to

¹⁸ Phyllis Tribble, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in *"Not in Heaven": Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, eds. Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 189.

¹⁹ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 60–61.

God." The father figure in patriarchal stories is also a religious figure. He addresses God directly without any mediators:

The patriarchal stories know no priest (apart from Gen 14), and the father of the household carries out the priestly function. He imparts the blessing and offers the sacrifice. Above all, the father receives the word of God directly, in particular the word that shows the group the way. There is no mediator of cult or word. Everything that happens between God and man happens directly, without any mediator.²⁰

Only the male knows what God says, and his wife and his family (and, later, the community at large) learn from him what God wants. The blessings and the sacrifices are determined by the patriarch based on the divine commands that he alone receives. In Abraham's story, God addresses Abraham directly, and only Abraham knows what he says. Landy points out that God is not an anthropomorphized, visible figure who speaks from the above, but rather an internal voice that only appears as coming from the outside:

The voice is experienced externally, as the voice of God, and yet it is an inner voice, since the narrative has hypostatized in it its creative and questioning drive, and since every outer voice, especially a disembodied one, corresponds to some inner reality. Otherwise it could not be heard. . . . The voice has special authority here, in Gen 22.1, since it has guided Abraham throughout his life. It represents, in narrative terms, the deepest part of his consciousness, since he only exists in the narrative insofar as he responds to that voice.²¹

Abraham exists only as a recipient of his inner voice. Like Abraham, God's voice is a rhetorical device: the voice is both Abraham and God. God exists insofar as his voice speaks to Abraham, in the same way that Abraham exists only insofar as he is spoken to. Thus, God is a rhetorical device that sanctifies Abraham's decisions. Entering with the omnipotent and omnipresent being into the covenant, passing the laws that the being has asked him to pass, Abraham himself becomes powerful, one who speaks and executes the will of someone more powerful than he is himself. In such arrangement, the woman, who is not spoken to by voice, whom the voice does not test in order to make her

²⁰ Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, 203.

²¹ Francis Landy, "Narrative Technique and Symbolic Transactions in the Akedah," in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), 2.

its spokesperson, is subjugated for as long as she accepts God's order and God's word as binding.²²

The patriarchal economy is structured on the relationship between the father and the God; it is imbued with the letter of the sacred, bound by faith, and manifested through acts of supreme obedience. The father becomes a lawgiver through the economy of the gift of death and the rhetoric of the divine voice that speaks to him alone. Thus, faith is the glue that cements the ideology of oppression: the patriarch's unquestionable faith and unquestionable obedience validate the word of the divine that in turn validates the word of the patriarch. Abraham's leap of faith is the tipping point of female subjection; it is an anamorphic shift that excludes the feminine from the contract with the sacred and the discourse of the law and ethical agency that the sacred structures. Woman's responsibility as an ethical subject is erased by her non-participation in the sacrificial exchange between man and divine, which cements man's subject position toward God as a lawgiver. Alicia Ostriker argues that the Akedah describes the change of the regime from matriarchy to patriarchy, from the primordial Mother-Goddess figure to the Father-God, who promotes and advances the cause of patriarchy and who is protected by it. Ostriker also suggests that the purpose of the biblical story was to make it explicit that Abraham could dispose of Isaac in whatever way he wished without Sarah knowing or having any power to influence his decision. The Akedah is a 'men's affair' between the two fathers. The conversation between God and Abraham alone emphasizes the fact that Isaac's life belongs only to Abraham; Isaac, who is Sarah's son also, is exclusively the property of the patriarch.²³ Thus, the hidden motive of the Akedah is to perform the 'silencing of a woman' who has no say with regard to the future and life of her offspring, but functions merely as a incubator for the patriarchal lineage. Ostriker summarizes the point thus:

²² In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some feminist biblical scholars who also worked with abused women noticed an interesting correlation: the more religious a woman was, the more she accepted her abuse as normal. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite notes: "Frequently, women with strong religious backgrounds have the most difficulty in accepting that the violence against them is wrong. They believe what they have been taught, that resistance to this injustice is unbiblical and unchristian. Christian women are supposed to be meek, and claiming rights for oneself is committing the sin of pride." "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 99.

²³ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 41.

The biblical story of monotheism and covenant is, to use the language of politics, a cover up... [to neutralize] female power. Biblical patriarchy... [commits] repeated acts of literal murder and oppression... for its triumph... [T]he canonization process throughout history has rested, not accidentally but essentially, on the silencing of women.²⁴

For Ostriker "the Judeo-Christian tradition... [is] a pathological culture," mainly because it is founded on the pathological oppression and silencing of women.²⁵

Berman stresses that the point of the Akedah is a reenactment of the direct relationship between Abraham and God. By sacrificing Isaac, Abraham is asked to give up his last human connection and to sustain himself, psychologically, emotionally, and so forth, only through his unencumbered relationship to God. Berman writes:

In the Akedah, God tests Abraham's willingness to separate himself—painfully and irreversibly from his son Isaac, as he had commanded Abraham to separate himself from his country, his kindred, and his father's house. Later he separated himself from Lot. At Sarah's insistence and with God's support, Abraham had separated himself from his son Ishmael. Separation is a recurring theme of the Abraham cycle, and the Akedah narrative is only one of many instances in which Abraham confronts the questions: "Can I give up every human connection—social and blood ties—and survive? Is my connection with God really strong enough to sustain me?"²⁶

Following the same argument, Tribble notices that the nature of faith is to put one's entire trust in the hands of the divine, the inner voice that guides one, above any family or love relations.

To attach is to practice idolatry. In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God. The test, then, is an opportunity for understanding and healing. To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom. To give up human anxiety is to receive divine assurance. To disavow idolatry is to find God... Abraham, a man of faith, has learned the lesson of nonattachment.²⁷

One might argue that by attaching himself to his inner voice as the only source of self-sustenance, Abraham is in fact attaching himself to himself; thus what the Akedah also reenacts is a masculine solipsism: Abraham's inner voice is the only voice he is willing to listen to. Faith

²⁴ Ibid., 30–31.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

²⁶ Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*, 44.

²⁷ Tribble, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," 179–181.

means foremost faith in one's own infallibility; having faith means that one has chosen oneself as the only valid and authoritative source for divine authority. To choose God means to choose oneself as one who chooses God.

Many feminist scholars point out that the ethical contract between God and Abraham, while based on Abraham's willingness to detach himself from human emotions, assumes that a) Sarah is incapable of such detachment, and b) her ability to detach herself should not be tested. For Tribble, the Akedah represents the glorification of the male as a free, detached individual, an ethical subject *par excellence*. However, the narrative structure of the Bible prior to Genesis 22 suggests that it is Sarah, not Abraham, who should be asked to detach herself from her son. Just as Hagar has to face the possibility of losing Ishmael in Genesis 21, in Genesis 22, it should be Sarah facing the possibility of losing Isaac. Narratively, the story pairs them together: Sarah/Hagar and Isaac/Ishmael. Abraham himself never makes his attachment to Isaac explicit prior to Genesis 22, so it is difficult to believe that Isaac's sacrifice represents a genuine loss for him and not merely a selfish and vain fear of not having a descendant to maintain the patriarchal lineage. Tribble writes:

[N]owhere prior to Genesis 22 does Abraham emerge as a man of attachment. That is not his problem. How ill-fitted he is, then, for a narrative of testing and sacrifice.... In view of the unique status of Sarah and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham, ought to be tested. The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, nonattached, the model of faithfulness. In making Abraham the object of the divine test, the story violates its own rhythm and movement.²⁸

Other feminist scholars also point out that not asking the mother to sacrifice her son presupposes that she would not be able to do so: her commitment to patriarchy and to her male child is taken for granted and requires no testing (Zipporah acts as a proper mother of a male child should: she offers herself in lieu of her son). Maternal instinct is presumed to be above and beyond divine demands, though covertly, the assumption serves the same function: never to question the possibility

²⁸ Ibid., 189.

that a mother might *not* be committed to propagating patriarchal lineage. After all, the presence of a son is the most sought-after blessing.²⁹ If she is presented as being able to dispose of her male child (such as Hannah), her motives are then interpreted as vicious and selfish (Hannah sacrifices her sons out of vanity, in order to match Abraham's sacrifice in God's eyes).³⁰ Esther Fuchs summarizes the point:

²⁹ "The plight of a barren woman, and God's promise that she will conceive, is another repeated biblical theme (e.g., Sarah, Hannah, the wife of Manoaah, the Shunammite woman)." Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*, 44. In Abraham's story, the promise of a son and annunciation is a focal point of the dramatic structure. Westermann notices: "The promise of the son is an essential part of the sequence of motifs which lead from Sarah's barrenness to the fulfillment in birth and marriage. It occurs only in the Abraham cycle, where it is of crucial importance for the whole. . . . [I]t is an inseparable element of a self-contained narrative. The promise of the son is the starting point and center of the promise motif in the patriarchal stories." *Genesis: An Introduction*, 217. The dramatic conflict usually ensues because "typically, the favored wife is barren, while the other wife bears children." Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*, 44. The annunciation and promise of a son from the favorite wife solves the dramatic tension, re-instating the patriarchal economy of reproduction as narratively logical and just. Esther Fuchs points out that a woman becomes a heroine only in those annunciation scenes in which she is promised to give birth to a son: "The biblical annunciation type-scene consists of three major thematic components: the initial barrenness of the wife, a divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son. . . . [T]he most significant variations pertain to the role of the potential mother in the annunciation type-scene; these variations, . . . constitute a consistently increasing emphasis on the potential mother as the true heroine of the annunciation type-scene." "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 119.

³⁰ The two biblical females who are asked to sacrifice their children are Hannah in 2 Maccabees, and Zipporah, wife of R. Meshullam. Hannah "refused to bow down to the idol, and every one of [her seven sons] died for the Sanctification of the Name." In most teleological readings, Hannah's sacrifice is regarded as a form of mimesis, sacrifice that is only modeled on Abraham's, and hence not a pure declaration of faith. There is an implication that Hannah's act is a *performance*, reenacted in wait for either the divine reward or out of "fear of God," not an unadulterated act of love toward God. In comparison to Hannah, the Akedah appears even more noteworthy and untainted: an exemplary gift of pure "goodness that must . . . forget itself." The second biblical female, Zipporah, offers herself in lieu of her son. Like Hannah, Zipporah is not asked to sacrifice her son directly by God, but via proxy, her husband. Therefore, there is *a priori* no possibility for divine mutuality in the economy of her "gift of death." Additionally, her willingness to die in lieu of her son is a form of bargaining: she cannot suspend her human morality and leap beyond aporia into absolute responsibility to the supreme being that is God. If the divine indeed asks her to sacrifice her beloved child, she is incapable of entrusting it. Her allegiance to the other surpasses her allegiance to God and to herself; after all, God doesn't ask her to sacrifice *herself*. Compared to Zipporah, Abraham's unquestioning response to God's demand is both a declaration of love for God and a declaration of self-worth. The fact that Abraham does not offer himself in lieu of Isaac implies that his life is worth as much as Isaac's, and hence it does not matter who dies; the judgment between the two belongs ultimately to God. Man has no power or right to

To acknowledge woman's disinterest in children would undermine one of the major premises of patriarchal thought: that a woman always desires to be a mother. . . . Only father figures are presented as capable of sacrificing the lives of their children. There is no female counterpart to Abraham and Jephthah.³¹

Hence, maternal love is a double bind. On the one hand, when a mother sacrifices her child, she is viewed not as a free individual, able to detach herself from human relations, but as selfishly focused on her own needs.

On the other hand, the "maternal instinct" is [also] portrayed as a highly selfish and confined inclination, mostly focused on one's own child. Sarah's concern for her son Isaac is presented as her primary motivation for driving Hagar and Ishmael out.³²

Thus, each woman's commitment to her male child as well as her relinquishing of such a commitment is seen as self-motivated. Rhetorically, no matter what a female does with her male child, whether she chooses to protect it or to offer it on the divine altar, her actions are always interpreted as self-seeking; she is never described as being capable of a sacrificial act of pure love toward the divine. In other words, woman cannot, should not, must not, either rhetorically or performatively, enter into the covenant with the divine voice of the law.

Because woman is excluded from the sacrificial exchange and the rhetoric of law that this exchange structures, her access to the divine can be achieved only through the economy of her *self*-sacrifice. When Satan failed to persuade Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, he "fell into a fury when he saw that his passionate wish to thwart Abraham's sacrifice was powerless. . . . He went and told Sarah."³³ In the guise of an old man, he tells her that Abraham has killed Isaac, to which she replies: "O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee"

judge his own life as less or more worthy than another man's. Woman, on the contrary, does so, and by doing so, she is undoing herself. Not only does she take upon herself the judgment that belongs to God, but her declaration is a declaration of her inferiority. The purpose of the binding of Isaac appears therefore twofold: it binds man to God, but it also takes away man's right to judge his own worth *vis-à-vis* other men. Not being able to judge himself, man always remains as value *in-itself* in the face of God, the supreme value *in-itself*.

³¹ Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," 133–134.

³² Ibid.

³³ Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 105.

(Jash 23:79–82). Afterward she becomes “still as a stone.” When she rises up, she goes to the land of Hebron to look for Isaac. There, Satan appears to her once again, telling her that Isaac is not dead after all. After hearing the news, “her joy was so exceedingly violent that her soul went out through joy; she died and was gathered to her people” (Jash 23:86). When Abraham finds her dead, he tries to buy a piece of land in which to bury her body. Ephron, the chief of the children of Heth, offers him, as a gift, a field to bury Sarah in, but Abraham insists on paying for it in order to “bury his dead out of his sight.” Eventually, Sarah is buried and mourned for seven days.

The story is poignant because it suggests that the space left by a woman as a subject of the sacrificial exchange creates a sacrificial crisis that is solved by reconfiguration of woman as an object of the sacrifice. According to Ostriker, Abraham’s wish to ‘bury my dead out of my sight,’ expresses his desire to dispose of his wife and her memory: a painful reminder of the sacrifice she made to solidify his ontological position. Someone had to die for the sacrificial contract to take place. Since Isaac survived, the gift of death is cemented with the death of Sarah, who cannot bear the joy of his survival. Isaac’s survival, literally, kills her. Symbolically, she replaces him as a sacrificial object. The logic of the sacrificial responsibility demands that she pay for her exclusion from the sacrificial contract by being the sacrifice herself. She is the embodied gift of death that is exchanged between man and God. Herself a gift of death, she is buried in what would be a gift. As Phyllis Tribble puts it:

From exclusion to elimination, denial do death, the attachment of Genesis 22 to patriarchy has given us not the sacrifice of Isaac... but the sacrifice of Sarah (for whom we mourn). By her absence from the narrative and her subsequent death, Sarah has been sacrificed by patriarchy to patriarchy.³⁴

In this biblical story, as anywhere else, Levi-Strauss noticed, the fundamental gift is always a woman.

“A woman’s sacrifice or a sacrifice of a woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other?”³⁵ Derrida asks. In French, the phrase *sacrifice d’une femme* is ambiguous: woman can be both a subject and an object of the sacrifice. What’s the difference? Can asking such a

³⁴ Tribble, “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah,” 190.

³⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 75–76.

question imply that the rhetorical difference between a woman's sacrifice and a sacrifice of a woman can be erased? Paul de Man expounds on Derrida's famous philosophical/grammatological question:

Jacques Derrida—who asks the question “What is the difference”—and we cannot even tell from his grammar whether he “really” wants to know “what” difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking.³⁶

Following de Man's separation of grammar and rhetoric, can we ask whether the difference between woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman is, like a gift of death, purely rhetorical? Does the difference between a woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman collapse into the empty space of woman's absence? Does the difference signify the collapse of the economy of the death-gift exchange, which is solved by being displaced onto the body of a dead female? Is the female the proof of the impossibility of the gift, filling out the operational space of the gift that is not given (Isaac—who is not killed)? Buried in the gift, is she the gift she (who) gives? Woman's sacrifice or the sacrifice of a woman? The difference between one and the other is the space of female agency from which she can speak as an ethical subject. To see the difference and to deny it marks the moment of the helpless surrender of the feminine subject attempting to reclaim her right to the sacrificial exchange: her right to give the gift of death.

The rhetoric of the sacrificial logic, which excludes woman from the space of power, signifies nothing beyond itself. Placed outside the economy of the sacred, femininity exposes its fundamental impossibility: the secret that there is no secret, the gift which is not. However, since woman's sacrifice (woman as a subject of the sacrifice) is inscribed within the sacrifice of a woman (woman as an object of the sacrifice), her death is intrinsic to her very being, and thus can never really gain the status of a gift: it is a gift that is a mimesis of a gift. It functions as a gift between man and God, but it can never function as *her* gift. Because woman functions as a gift (in Levi-Strauss's sense as well), her position as an agent of her own sacrifice is necessarily erased. Hence, she can never “give herself” without fulfilling her feminine in-itself of the gift. She cannot transcend her *being* a gift by *turning* herself into a

³⁶ Paul DeMan, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” *Diacritics* (Fall, 1973): 29.

gift. Because she is always already *a priori* an object of the gift, her gift is not an act of will, and hence it is not a gift that would structure her position as an ethical subject. In an interview with Christie McDonald, Derrida once asked:

What kind of ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?³⁷

What if...?

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Choreographies: Interview. Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald," in *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Nancy J. Holland (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 35.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ACHSAH GETS OFF HER ASS? QUEER READING AND JUDGES 1:11–15

Ken Stone

Scholars of literature often ask questions about the interrelations among reading, gender, identity and identification. When one raises such questions about biblical texts, several specific complications come into play. The Bible was written in an ancient world characterized by male domination and patriarchal social structure. Most characters in the Bible are male, and when female characters appear they usually play subordinate roles to male protagonists. Thus Mary Ann Tolbert suggests that biblical plots are generally structured in such a way as to encourage women “to identify with a male perspective . . . in order simply to follow the story line; we must, in other words, imagine ourselves as male in order to fulfill the conventional role of reader.”¹

Tolbert goes on to argue, however, that it is precisely through conscious resistance to such conventional reading roles that women may find constructive ways of interpreting biblical literature. Women can read the Bible, Tolbert suggests, “in a new way.”² Such a suggestion highlights a tension that I would like to explore here between, on the one hand, conventional gendered reading positions that may be encouraged by the biblical texts; and, on the other hand, a resistance to such conventional reading positions, a resistance that specifically takes the form, not of avoiding the Bible, but rather of reading it “in a new way.” One wonders, though, whether the language used to articulate this tension doesn’t too often construct a picture of the relations between gender and reading that is much more stable and neat than are most actual reading situations. Is it always the case, for example, that we begin reading a text with a coherent sense of our own gender already in place? If we identify with characters in the text, do we always identify with central protagonists? Are those protagonists always and only male?

¹ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma,” in Alice Bach (ed.), *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 18.

² Ibid.

Are they all male—or, in some instances, female—in the same way, or to the same extent? And whether we focus on central protagonists, or whether we find our attention being captured by characters other than central protagonists, will the characters with which we identify necessarily be the “same” gender as ourselves? What, exactly, do we mean in any case when we say, as I just did, that a character is “the ‘same’ gender as ourselves”? However one answers such questions, the mere raising of them may indicate that the relations between reading and gender are more complex, unstable, and perhaps even “queer,” than accounts of biblical interpretation often allow. If that is the case, perhaps the best approach we could take toward reading the Bible “in a new way” is to focus intentionally on reading scenarios in which gender and identification are not neatly aligned, or in which neat alignments between gender and identification are problematized rather than sought.

Such will be my approach here. Rather than focusing on scenarios in which either women readers or men readers interact with male characters (which are the scenarios most often implied by an emphasis on biblical protagonists), and rather than focusing on scenarios in which women readers interact with female characters (which are alternative scenarios often examined by feminist biblical scholars today),³ I wish to consider strategically a reading scenario that has received less attention, a scenario in which male readers of the Bible focus on, and possibly even identify with, female characters. I will not focus on male readers in general, however, for male readers of the Bible do not all stand in the same relation to codes of gender. I wish, instead, to take as my point of departure the situation of gay male readers. While I do not imagine that such readers make up any sort of homogeneous class, it does seem to me that gay male readers, whatever our other differences from one another (and they are numerous), do often stand in somewhat complicated relations to codes of manhood, complicated relations that tend to be obscured or ignored by most discussions of gender and biblical interpretation. Among these complications one must include a tendency among some gay men toward cross-gendered identification during the processing of interpretive objects. While this tendency has been analyzed by others in relation to such specific instances as, for example,

³ Note, for example, how the combination of women readers and female characters is emphasized by many of the entries in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition With Apocrypha* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

gay male identification with female screen actresses or singers,⁴ very little attention have been given to the possibility that gay male readers of the Bible might also sometimes find it useful to identify with female characters. Indeed, if female characters are rare enough that women readers of the Bible have difficulty finding them, and if female characters are (given the nature of biblical literature) subordinate enough to the plots of male characters that women readers often find little reason to get excited about them, it might seem that there would be even less reason for gay men to identify with such characters.

But not all female characters found in the Bible remain equally circumscribed by the constraints of the social system represented in the texts. Within a patriarchal world, a few female characters act in surprising ways. To the extent that their narrated actions contravene the expectations about gendered behavior that are fostered by other elements of the biblical texts, such characters might be considered a little “queer.” That being the case, we might imagine that attention by gay men or other queer readers of the Bible to the gendered ambiguities and surprises that surround some of its characters could encourage such readers to enact gendered ambiguities and surprises of their own.

Of course, this is not the way in which one normally approaches the topic of biblical interpretation. Because the Bible is so often considered “scripture,” readers frequently imagine themselves to be looking in it for a specific kind of religious content or “revelation.” Yet I suspect that, for most readers of the Bible, the significance of biblical interpretation actually has as much to do with process as with content. Readers use biblical interpretation to renegotiate their own attitude, options, and agency vis-à-vis the circumstances of their lives, including circumstances related to gender. The religious character that many such readers attribute to the text may be less important than the changes readers effect on their own lives and experiences, during and as a result of their semiotic activity. Or, as we might put it on the basis of Foucault’s later writings and interviews, the reading of biblical (and other) texts is one of those practices by which readers of the Bible stylize, and effect transformations on, their own selves.⁵ To borrow words that Foucault

⁴ E.g., Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵ See my “Biblical Interpretation as a Technology of the Self: Gay Men and the Ethics of Reading,” in Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips (eds.), *Bible and Ethics of Reading*, *Semeia* 77 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1977); and “The Garden of Eden and the

once made about reading, we often interpret texts in such a way that “at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue...”⁶ Biblical interpretation therefore constitutes, potentially at least, a kind of ongoing practice of the self, which takes its place among other practices of the self, many of which are inflected by gender.⁷ And if such practices bring the reader into contact with gendered characters who act in unexpected ways vis-à-vis gendered expectations, this contact might well have an impact on the kind of self that the reader of the Bible produces and embodies.

One female character who has recently received a great deal of attention from feminist interpreters of the Bible, partly because she does act in ways that surprise us when we compare her to other biblical representations of women, is the young woman Achsah who appears in the first chapter of Judges. The entire narrative segment that tells about Achsah includes at most six verses in Judges (though her story appears as well in Joshua 15). Moreover, the first appearance of her name occurs in a context which underscores the patriarchal world that threatens to determine her fate: her father, Caleb, offers her as wife to any man who will attack and capture the city of Kiriath-Sepher (1:12). When Caleb’s kinsman Othniel captures that city, Caleb “gave to him Achsah his daughter as a wife” (1:13).⁸ Initially, then, there seems to be little about the story of Achsah that would stand in tension with biblical gender norms. Consistent with the assumptions about gender and marriage that structure numerous biblical passages, Achsah is represented as an object of the decisions of a father who has the right to give her away to another man.⁹ She is the gift who serves, in the words

Heterosexual Contract,” in Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (eds.), *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁶ Michel Foucault, “How An ‘Experience Book’ Is Born,” in *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext, 1991), 32.

⁷ On the relationship between gender and Foucault’s later emphasis on “practices of the self,” see Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintages (eds.), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Margaret McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), esp. 145–164; Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

⁹ On these assumptions, see Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 68–89, *passim*.

of a famous article by Gayle Rubin on the giving and taking of women, as the “conduit of a relationship” between two male characters.¹⁰

Beginning in the following verse, however, things become much less clear. This is true, first of all, at the level of text and translation. Verse 14 opens with the words, “And it happened, when she came, . . .” In the Hebrew Masoretic text, the next verb—the one that tells us what happened “when she came”—has a feminine subject and a masculine object. Following that Hebrew tradition, the New Revised Standard Version translates, “she urged him” (the “him” in this case referring, presumably, to Othniel); while the Jewish Publication Society’s translation reads “she induced him.” However, in the Greek and Latin translations, which sometimes preserve a Hebrew version older than our surviving Hebrew manuscripts, the same verse is rendered with a masculine subject and a feminine object. Many commentators suggest that the latter structure is here likely to be original, hence “correct.” Robert Boling, for example, translates “he nagged her” instead of “she urged him.”¹¹ Gendered subjects and objects are therefore confused, at this point, in the textual and interpretive traditions from which readers create the sense of a single “Bible.”

Now which of these two, quite different, possibilities should we follow when we decide to read Achsah’s story? The answer to that question partly depends on the meaning of the verb that is ambiguously gendered. Unfortunately, this matter, too, is contested in both the commentaries and modern translations, which render the word in a number of different ways.¹² However, some sort of instigation or incitement is involved. The subject of the verb is inciting the object to ask Achsah’s father for a field.

As feminist scholars have noted, commentators who wrestle with this obscure passage seem to be motivated to a striking degree by concerns

¹⁰ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 174.

¹¹ Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 51, 56–57. Cf. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 22.

¹² See Danna Nolan Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)razed City of Writing,” in Gale A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), esp. 128–131.

about the status of Othniel as male hero.¹³ Othniel, after all, is one of the warrior “judges” or “deliverers” in the book of Judges. The idea, then, that Othniel might need to be persuaded or even seduced by his more ambitious wife into approaching Caleb for property, on the one hand, is as troublesome as the idea that Othniel might need to “nag” his subordinate wife to secure that property from his kinsman Caleb, on the other hand. The gendered ambiguity of the verb’s subject and object pronouns, in our textual witnesses, appears to provoke inordinate amounts of gender anxiety on the part of commentators, most of whom are male.

Feminist readers, while differing with one another in their translation of the verb, usually follow the Masoretic text in making Achsah the subject of instigation here. Such a decision heightens female action in a text in which, as we shall see, it is indeed unusually present. But rather than trying to resolve a textual difficulty that can never be eliminated entirely (since any decision to follow either the Masoretic Hebrew tradition or the Greek and Latin traditions may be unsettled by the ongoing witness of the other alternative), a queer reading might choose instead to exploit the problem of ambiguously gendered pronouns. For if it is the case, as Judith Butler argues, that the “institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term,” it may be important for those of us who wish to contest “a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality” to resist the hasty imposition of gender coherence onto a textual tradition characterized by more gender ambiguity or confusion than readers usually allow.¹⁴ If we are going to read the Bible “in a new way,” we may need to highlight the many uncertainties that always surround biblical interpretation, in spite of those strong cultural and religious pressures which foster the peculiar illusion that the Bible is a single, stable object. Since matters of sex and gender are also subject to such pressures toward illusory stabilization, those instances in which the study of biblical literature produces “gender trouble” can provide us with valuable opportunities for resisting the closures of both gender fundamentalism and biblical fundamentalism.

¹³ Fewell, *ibid.*; Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 152–153; Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 12–13.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–23.

Of course, the decision to take advantage of such opportunities needs to be weighed against other imperatives for biblical interpretation, including the imperative to read the Bible in ways that will recognize or support women's agency. The latter imperative will sometimes mean that gender ambiguities in the textual tradition can be exploited to good effect when those ambiguities are interpreted strategically to increase the visibility or interest of female characters and imagery. Thus, one might easily make a feminist case for interpreting the ambiguity of gendered subjects and objects in the textual witnesses to Judges 1:14 in such a way as to heighten Achsah's textual agency.

Yet that agency is already evident elsewhere in the story. By the end of verse 14, in fact, and just after the narrator has let us know about the plan to ask Caleb for a field, Achsah, according to the New Revised Standard Version, "dismounted from her donkey." Or, as the King James Version puts it, "she lighted from off her ass." Now this is the first time we have heard about Achsah's ass. Nothing has been said about her mounting a donkey, or traveling upon one from Othniel to Caleb. Indeed, it is not quite as apparent as readers of English translations might imagine that she dismounts from one, either. The verb rendered "dismounted" in the New Revised Standard Version is very rare, and is attested in only two other places in the Hebrew Bible, one of which is the parallel telling of Achsah's story in Joshua 15. Its meaning is thus arguably even more obscure than the earlier verb that had an ambiguously gendered subject and object, though at least in this case we are clearly dealing with a feminine subject: whatever takes place in relation to Achsah's ass, it is Achsah who does it.

The action seems, however, to grab Caleb's attention, for he immediately asks Achsah, "What to you?" Or, as Boling puts it in his translation, "What's wrong?"¹⁵ It is partly on the basis of this sudden attention from Achsah's father that the feminist literary critic Mieke Bal has proposed the translation, "she clapped."¹⁶ And, indeed, the notion that Achsah here claps from atop her ass to get Caleb's attention seems more plausible than, for example, the notorious and unintentionally humorous philological suggestion that she "breaks wind."¹⁷ But as

¹⁵ Boling, *Judges*, 51.

¹⁶ Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 153–155.

¹⁷ This translation, found for example in the New English Bible, was defended on the basis of an appeal to Akkadian parallels by the noted philologist G.R. Driver, "Problems of Interpretation in the Hexateuch," in *Mélanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Paris: Blund and Gray, 1966), 75–76. Today it is almost universally rejected.

Tammi Schneider points out, Caleb's surprise may be motivated less by Achsah's specific actions "from on her ass" than by the fact that she has traveled to her father without any husband in the first place. In Schneider's words, "Her descent from the donkey is not as important as her traveling alone and leaving her husband. Her descent in front of her father signifies her arrival at Caleb's place where he was not expecting her."¹⁸ Achsah surprises, then, by acting in ways unexpected by the patriarch, specifically by journeying back to the father who gave her away without the accompaniment of husband or, so far as we can tell, any other male traveling companion. She acts in a manner that stands in tension with assumptions about proper gendered, and marital, behavior.

Achsah continues to surprise, moreover, when she speaks in verse 15. For here she demands (in Hebrew imperative form) that her father give her property. In a Bible where reports of female ownership of land are, if not unheard of, nevertheless rare, such a demand is itself unusually assertive. Yet the text may go even further than this. Achsah's words to her father can be rendered, with the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh translation, as "Give me a present; for you have given me away as Negeb-land; give me springs of water." That is to say, though treated formerly like the dry land of the south, Achsah orders her father to give her well-irrigated (hence fertile) land now. Here Achsah seems to acknowledge that she has previously been constrained by the patriarchal social structure presupposed by both father and husband. She is treated by men as if she were property. But Achsah is not willing to remain silent or passive in the face of such treatment. She demands more than the biblical literature would normally lead us to imagine that an Israelite daughter might demand. And her demand, though characterized accurately by Schneider as "shocking" in its ancient context, is nevertheless efficacious.¹⁹ Faced with such an assertive daughter, Caleb the patriarch passively gives her both upper and lower pools of water. Here we have a text, then, which disrupts some of the assumptions we normally make about biblical literature and gender.

It is not immediately clear which character we ought to identify here as the story's protagonist. Othniel accomplishes a military victory in verse 13, and his military prowess explains why he is, in a later chapter,

¹⁸ Schneider, *Judges*, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

identified as one of the figures who, with divine help, “judges” in the book of “Judges” (3:10). However, nothing is said explicitly about his “judging” in chapter 1, and he acts mainly to get a woman. Indeed, he hardly acts here at all. The only time he might be mentioned in the chapter, after he captures the city of Kiriath-sepher, is when he instigates Achsah to ask for property; and even this possibility is, as we have seen, dependent upon a Greek alternative to the standard Hebrew text that introduces into our textual evidence gender ambiguity. Caleb, on the other hand, would seem at first to be a good candidate for biblical protagonist. Though not a judge, Caleb speaks even before the appearance of Othniel, attempting to contribute to the project in which Israel is, at the beginning of the book of Judges, clearly engaged with divine approval: taking control of the land. He seems, moreover, to have assets that would be considered valuable to an Israelite patriarch: both a marriageable daughter and significant property. In the end, however, it is the daughter he has given away who, in a twist on the subject/object relations constitutive of the beginning of the story, demands and receives watering springs. And although we might imagine that these springs would, within the ancient context, logically now belong to Othniel, the text nowhere states as much. The language very explicitly tells us that Caleb gave the springs “to her” (1:15), that is, Achsah. Indeed, we are never really told whether Achsah returns to Othniel at all.

Thus, if the story begins with a scene—the promise of a daughter—that we could appropriately characterize as representing the logic of ancient patriarchy, the trajectory of the text nevertheless does not force us as readers to remain trapped within that logic in any simple way. Patriarchal promise turns to gendered ambiguity, and out of gendered ambiguity emerges a reversal of the gendered subject-object positions that are constitutive of much ancient male dominance. The text certainly does not hide the reality of patriarchal relations of gender; but it need not be read as confirming the stability or inevitability of those relations, either. Rather, it disturbs those relations, and shifts them around, producing unclear results here and unexpected results there. In short, it queers them.²⁰

²⁰ For my understanding of “queer,” see *Practicing Safer Texts*; “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 38/1 (Spring 2008), 14–25; and “Queer Commentary and Biblical Interpretation: An Introduction,” in Ken Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2001).

Moreover, the instabilities set in motion by this story are not restricted to matters of gender. Matters of kinship and ethnicity are ambiguous as well. While Caleb seems at first, in the context of Judges 1, to be a member of the Israelite tribe of Judah, the designation of Othniel, “his brother,” as a “son of Kenaz” can be read as indicating that both Caleb and Othniel are Kenizzites. The Kenizzites, however, while clearly associated with Israelites in some biblical texts, are understood by Genesis 36 to have been descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau (Edom), and hence perhaps more closely related to the Edomites, who function in many biblical texts as enemies of the Israelites. Genesis 15.19 goes further, including the Kennizzites among those peoples who already inhabit the land that God will give to Abraham’s descendants. Yet here, Caleb and Othniel are involved with the tribe of Judah in bringing about the very Israelite takeover that Genesis 15.19 seems to anticipate. It therefore seems impossible to answer, in a straightforward way, the question that Danna Fewell raises: “Are Caleb, Achsah, and Othniel Israelites, or are they foreigners?”²¹ When we are dealing with a book such as Judges, which often seems to understand the intermingling of Israelite and non-Israelite negatively, our inability to answer this question definitively is striking indeed. It is not only the boundaries of gender identity that are “queered” by a close reading of this text. The boundaries of ethnic identity are destabilized as well, exactly as recent trends in queer theory would lead us to expect.

Now in reading the story of Achsah this way, I do not intend to imply that the book of Judges provides us with anything like a queer manifesto. On the other hand, neither would I accept any suggestion that the unstable gender and textual dynamics found in this brief incident stand entirely in contrast with what we find elsewhere in the book. While Judges includes some horrific scenes of gender-related violence (notably in chapters 11 and 19–21), it also includes characters other than Achsah who act in ways that our assumptions about the Bible and gender might not lead us to expect. Chief among such characters are, of course, Deborah and Jael, who in chapters 4 and 5 play instrumental roles in the military victory of Israelite tribes over Canaanite kings. But male characters are not always represented in the book of Judges in ways that meet biblical gender expectations, either. It is, after all, the male Canaanite Sisera who is “penetrated” by the Kenite

²¹ Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism,” 131.

woman Jael, in a violent scene with many sexual connotations;²² and it is the male Israelite judge Samson who is symbolically castrated by Delilah, a woman of ambiguous ethnic and religious affiliation.²³ Indeed, reversals and displacements of gender, ethnicity and religion occur throughout the book of Judges.²⁴ Although attempts have been made to read these reversals and displacements as if they lead the reader to clear conclusions,²⁵ it seems more likely to me that any straightforward interpretation of Judges will always be susceptible to the “unsettling” that results when one is attentive to what Fewell calls “the ways in which the text [of Judges] is at odds with itself.”²⁶

But what sorts of effects might we imagine such an “unsettling” reading of the story of Achsah having on those gay male readers whom I mentioned at the beginning of this essay? Obviously, there are no “gay male” characters in the story of Achsah. Indeed, the application of our phrase, “gay male,” to the world that produced the Bible is almost certainly anachronistic, even if the phrase is used as a way of getting at attitudes toward, or practices of, same-sex eroticism which existed in that world.²⁷ On the other hand, gay men today do, like Achsah, sometimes find ourselves in circumstances where social practice, ideological assumption, and even the actions of family members combine in such a way that options for a livable life seem quite constrained. In such circumstances, the recognition that Achsah, though clearly constrained herself, nevertheless acts in surprising ways to better her own situation, may stimulate gay male readers of the Bible to imagine

²² See Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Schneider, *Judges*, 75–81.

²³ See Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 55; J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993), 84.

²⁴ For further discussion, see my “Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech,” in Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method*, second edition.

²⁵ See, for example, the effort by Schneider, *Judges*, to read the book’s references to gender, ethnicity and religion as if they helped to make Judges a unified, literary document communicating more or less clear conclusions.

²⁶ Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism,” 121, 123.

²⁷ See Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); and my *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 69–84.

repositioning ourselves over against elements of our own world. An ability to maneuver within the real constraints of a social context that works to the benefit of others, a willingness to act in ways that contravene norms of gender and sometimes ethnicity, a determination to make demands of those with real social power—all of these characteristics of Achsah gesture toward qualities that gay men today understandably wish to foster among ourselves. Thus, Achsah may well offer gay male readers of the Bible an opportunity for cross-gendered identification in biblical interpretation. The point of making such a suggestion is not primarily to retrieve the Bible or reinstate its religious “authority” for gay men. The point is to use biblical interpretation strategically as an occasion for calling into question reading assumptions that make their own contribution, however limited, to heteronormativity, such as the assumption that male characters necessarily act one way and female characters, another; or the assumption that male readers will normally identify with these characters, and female readers with those; or even the assumption that we can always tell clearly when biblical action is being carried out by a male character, and when by a female one.

The Bible is often associated, by friend and foe alike, with unified meanings, fixed texts, and stable norms. Numerous interpretive orthodoxies, from theological dogmatism to literary formalism, work hard to strengthen the association. It has to be acknowledged that there is much in the Bible which lends itself to such an impression; and on few matters is this more apparent than on matters pertaining to gender. But Butler among others has taught us to resist the assumption that gender matters are ever quite as coherent as we normally assume. This resistance to assumptions about coherence needs to be extended to our habits of reading the Bible. And as we try to reshape those habits of reading, we may find it fruitful indeed to give continued attention to Achsah, and to the actions that she takes when she gets off her ass.

ISAAC AS THE LAMB OF GOD: A HERMENEUTIC CRUX IN THE RE-READING OF JEWISH TEXTS

John C. Ulreich

In a recent study of Abraham as the ancestor of three faiths, Bruce Feiler observes that “Jews, Christians, and Muslims . . . have [all] chosen to place the narrative of a father preparing to kill his son at the heart of their self-understanding”¹ Feiler’s insight raises disturbing questions for both Jewish and Christian understandings of the Bible. To be sure, the two faith traditions tend to read the story in profoundly different ways. Judaism generally rejects the idea of child sacrifice, whereas Christianity displaces the sacrifice onto the Father God, who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).² But the patriarchal image of an all-consuming father who demands the sacrifice of his son overshadows both traditions. Therein lies the very large problem on which I hope to shed a little light in this paper.

According to the story told in the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, Elohim tells Abraham: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). As he had done many years earlier when he responded to Yahweh’s call to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (Genesis 12:1), Abraham responds with unquestioning obedience: rising “early in the morning, [he] saddle[s] his donkey, and [takes] two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut[s] the wood for the burnt offering, and set[s] out and [goes] to the place in the distance that *Elohim* had shown him” (Genesis 22:3). He arrives at the Mount of Vision fully prepared to carry out Elohim’s command. But at the last possible moment, an angel of Yahweh “calls out to him from heaven”

¹ Feiler, Bruce. *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 108.

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. One general exception to this rule is that I have substituted the Hebrew terms *Elohim* for “God,” and *Yahweh* for “(the) LORD.” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, 3d ed. (ed.) Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

and says "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12). Abraham looks up and sees "a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns," so he takes "the ram and offer[s] it up as a burnt offering instead of his son" (Genesis 22:13). He calls the place *Yahweh-yireh*, probably signifying that "Yahweh will see to it."³ And so the story ends, we might say, happily. It was only a test.

As Erich Auerbach observed many years ago, this story is deeply mysterious and "fraught with background": because its opaque surface inevitably points toward "concealed meaning," the story "positively demand[s] the symbolic interpretation which [it] later received."⁴ In general, both Jewish and Christian exegetes have read the story parabolically in order to affirm Abraham's act as a crucial expression of faith. But the tension between the surface meaning of the story and its hidden depth yields an almost unbearable paradox. Stephen Mitchell has captured the intensity of this paradox with great clarity in his parable called "The Binding of Isaac":

Abraham is caught in a dilemma. In parable, he must sacrifice his beloved son, even if a substitute should miraculously appear, bleating, within the thicket. In fact, however, the command is obviously demonic and he must refuse. In parable, he is a paragon of wisdom; but he is a homicidal maniac in fact.⁵

The general purpose of this essay is to explore some of the implications of that paradox and to ask, in effect, whether Abraham passed the test.

Judaism: "Consecrate to me all the firstborn" (Exodus 13:2)

Then you [Moses] shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says Yahweh: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son." (Exodus 4:23–24)

³ My translation here follows Robert Alter's attempt to capture the word-play in Hebrew on the verb *ra'ah*, whose meanings range from 'appear,' 'behold,' and 'see' to 'provide for' and 'take care of.' When Isaac inquires about the conspicuous absence of an appropriate sacrificial animal, Abraham cryptically (or deceptively? or prophetically?) replies: "God himself will provide [*yir'eh*] the lamb for a burnt offering" (NRSV 22:8). Alter translates: "God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son" (Alter 110). Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

⁴ Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), 11–12, 7.

⁵ Stephen Mitchell. *Parables and Portraits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 27.

In the Jewish tradition, the story has generally been understood figuratively, as representing an extreme form of *self*-sacrifice in obedience to God's will. As W. Gunther Plaut has observed, for example: "God... may require of man... to give up that which he loves most."⁶ As Plaut tacitly acknowledges, however, this understanding of Abraham's intention begs the question, since it is not his own life that he offers but that of his son. Perhaps it is this recognition that has led many liberal interpreters to rationalize the story as representing a definitive *rejection* of human sacrifice. Plaut, for example, observes that, at a time when the practice of human sacrifice was widespread, "Abraham could have considered the command to sacrifice his son entirely legitimate.... It is therefore important to notice that in the beginning of the test the command is issued by Elohim—the generic term for God or gods—and the command is one that other elohim could and did make. But when the sacrifice is about to be performed it is Abraham's God, Adonai, who stays his hand."⁷

This rationalization seems to me more ingenious than convincing. Besides begging the question of why Abraham would have listened to some *other* elohim in the first place, it imputes to the story a lesson that the story itself does not enforce. The narrative does not end with an injunction against human sacrifice; on the contrary, Abraham is praised "*Because you have done this*, and have not withheld your son, your only son" (22:16; emphasis added). The repetition of "have not withheld your son, your only son" (22:12 and 22:16) emphasizes what Abraham *has* done, offering his son, not what he has refrained from doing by not actually killing him.

Moreover, when the emphasis on Abraham's trust and obedience is played out along more traditional lines, it falls rather easily into a kind of moral relativism that I find very troublesome. J.H. Hertz, for example, argues that during the period of the Maccabean revolt:

⁶ W. Gunther Plaut (ed.), *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 149. Many scholars would interpret the term of *Elohim* as a sign that the story derives, originally, from the so-called Elohistic source of the Pentateuch. Thus Richard Elliott Friedman: "it has been suggested that in the original version of this story Isaac was actually sacrificed, and that the intervening four verses [11–14, in which Isaac is spared, and which identify the deity as Yahweh] were added subsequently [perhaps by the person who combined J and E], when the notion of human sacrifice was rejected." Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987) 257.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his most sacred affections on the altar of God evoked and developed a new ideal in Israel, *the ideal of martyrdom*. The story of Hannah and her seven sons... has come down to us in many forms. In one of these, the martyr mother says to her youngest child, 'Go to Abraham our Father, and tell him that I have bettered his instruction. He offered one child to God; I offered seven. He merely bound the sacrifice: I performed it' (Midrash)... Many today have no understanding of martyrdom. They fail to see that it represents the highest irresistible triumph of humanity—unwavering steadfastness to principle, even at the cost of life.⁸

What strikes me about the stories in question, however, is that the sacrifice of life for principle is made, primarily, not by the children, who have no say and who are represented as essentially the property of their parents, but by the parents who offer the lives of their children for the sake of a principle. And it is very difficult to discern what principle is at stake in this instance. *Why* must Isaac be offered to God? The story tells us only that *Elohim* "tested" Abraham. What could possibly be the point of such a test? The most widely accepted answers to this question play variations on the theme that Abraham's "test" provides a lesson in faith to future generations. For me, at least, that answer does not suffice. No matter how I try to rationalize it, Abraham's obedience to an evil command, violates my fundamental understanding of who we are as creatures made in the image of a loving God. Love does not demand such sacrifices of its offspring, even as a test.

Taken in isolation, the story remains profoundly irrational. In the well-known formulation of Søren Kierkegaard: "though Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appalls me."⁹ But of course, the story does not stand in isolation. It is an episode in the much larger story of Jacob-Israel's ancestors and his descendants that is told in the Torah, the story of Exile and Return that has shaped Israel's self-understanding through the ages. One striking dimension of that narrative is the peculiar relation between Yahweh and the first-born sons among his chosen people. A curious episode in the fourth chapter

⁸ Hertz, J.H. (ed.), *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, 2d ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 201.

⁹ In Kierkegaard's terms, the story is both deeply enigmatic and inescapably tragic, as Aristotle suggests: tragedy "through pity and fear [or *admiration*] effects relief to these and similar emotions" (*Poetics* VI.2). Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Edna Hatlestad Hong and Howard Vincent Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1945), 90.

of Exodus underscores this theme. After his encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush and just as he was setting out to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt, when Moses, his son (Gershom, his first-born), and his wife Zipporah, were camped for the night, Yahweh “met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ [Heb *his*] feet with it, and said, ‘Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’ So he let him alone” (Exodus 4:24–26). This episode is confusing in itself: the pronouns (he/his) do not make clear whether the attack is directed against Moses or Gershom, and though “feet” is surely a euphemism for genitals, it is again unclear whether the organ in question belongs to Moses or his first born. More crucially, it makes no sense at all for Yahweh (not Elohim) to kill his own messenger before he has delivered the message. Nonetheless, as Plaut observes, the meaning of this “contraction of an originally fuller tale” can “be deduced from the context. Immediately preceding (4:23) is the statement that Israel is God’s first-born son and that, because Pharaoh will refuse to grant him freedom to worship, his own first born will be taken.”¹⁰

The reiterations of “first-born” (Exodus 4:22, 23) and “bridegroom of blood” (Exodus 25, 26) mark the confluence of two central themes in the Torah that crucially define the significance of Abraham’s sacrifice for all generations to come: the need to redeem the first born and the transformation of circumcision from a puberty rite (“bridegroom of blood”) into a sign of the covenant with Yahweh. At Mount Sinai, Moses tells the people:

Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.... you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb.... Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. When in the future your child asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall answer, “By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male [animal] that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.” (Exodus 13:2, 13–15)

In Genesis, Isaac is clearly identified as the first born when he is three times called Abraham’s only son (Genesis 2, 12, 16), as if Ishmael had

¹⁰ Plaut, 416, 417.

never existed.¹¹ His forfeit life is *redeemed* when the ram caught in the thicket is sacrificed in his stead.

That substitution is marked by the symbolic sacrifice of the foreskin in circumcision. The Elohist story in Chapter 22 is the third time that the story of Abraham's covenant with God is told in Genesis. According to the Yahwist (Judahite) tradition reported in Genesis 15, the covenant was marked by animal sacrifice; according to the later Priestly tradition, there was no sacrifice, only the institution of circumcision:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Genesis 17:10–11)

In the Binding of Isaac, the link between the two forms of sacrifice remains implicit, but later tradition makes the connection explicit. Circumcision becomes a sacrificial rite of redemption in the covenant. When Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day, the reading from the Torah is the story in Genesis 22:

I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.... and by your

¹¹ Isaac is not Abraham's *only* son, of course; he is Ishmael's younger brother. A.E. Speiser translates the word *ychyd* as "beloved," arguing that "Heb. uses a term that is not the regular adjective for 'one,' but a noun meaning 'the unique one, one and only.' Isaac, of course, is not an only son (xxi 11). The correct rendering [*agapētón*] is already found in LXX, and the meaning is reinforced in Heb. by the phrase that immediately follows." A.E. Speiser (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 163. Stephen Mitchell agrees, citing (and translating) Arnold Ehrlich: "It is very doubtful whether the usual meaning of *ychyd* is 'only.' Here the word cannot have this meaning.... *ychyd*, which is a substantive, not an adjective, means here, and very probably everywhere, *darling*." I find it rather telling that Ehrlich cites Judges 11:34 as an instance of the "everywhere" in question; the verse refers to Jephthah's daughter: "She was his *ychyd* [NRSV: only] child; he had no son or daughter except her." Stephen Mitchell, *Genesis: A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 137. Neither Hertz nor Plaut comments on the translation; the former reads "only" (74) the latter "your favored one" (146). Alter argues, in my view persuasively, for a more nuanced reading, and translates "your only one." He observes that "Some scholars, bothered by the technical inaccuracy of the term, have followed an ancient reading of *yadid*, 'favored one,' instead of the Masoretic *yachid*. This seriously misses the point that in regard to Abraham's feelings, Isaac, this sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one" (Alter 103). Despite the usual Christian preference for Septuagint readings, Christian interpretations of Genesis and of Christ's relation to his Father frequently assert the uniqueness of the son, as for instance: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And the older translation of this passage is even more emphatic in identifying the Logos as "the Father's only Son."

offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves" (Genesis 26:4).

Christianity: "God...gave his only Son" (John 3:16)

If the blood of goats and bulls...sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ...purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Hebrews 9:13-14)

The blessing of Abraham became for Christians a fatal link between first born sons and sacrifice. According to Christian theologies of atonement, Father and Son become actors in a cosmic drama that simultaneously displaces and reinvigorates the myth of child-sacrifice. The son now participates willingly in satisfying the bloodlust of the father. God the Father asks, as it were, "Where shall I find a lamb for a sin offering?" And his dutiful Son answers: "Here I am."

If Jewish tradition can plausibly claim to have rejected the notion of child sacrifice, Christianity has embraced it with a passion. As Plaut has observed, "Abraham's religion not only rejects the sacrifice of a son by a father but rejects, as well, its use as a theological theme. This is in stark contrast to...Christianity, in which a father's sacrificial gift of his son plays an important role."¹² I think Plaut has oversimplified the traditional Jewish attitude toward blood sacrifice; as I have suggested, by the time of the Monarchy, proto-Judaism had displaced human sacrifice by substituting animal sacrifice, and when the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, ritual circumcision seems to have become a kind of symbolic sacrifice, according to the Priestly tradition embedded in Genesis. That is an improvement, surely, but it does not really resolve the ethical dilemma posed by taking life in order to affirm life. At the same time, however, Plaut's understated observation about the centrality of child sacrifice to Christian theology is disturbingly pointed: we Christians worship a God who not only does not reject but actively demands such sacrifice—at least in one, crucial case.

From the first, Christian theology has affirmed a typological reading of scripture that links Isaac, Abraham's "only and beloved son" (Genesis 22:2) with "the only Son of God."¹³ Isaac on the altar foreshadows Jesus's offering of himself as a willing sacrifice to appease divine wrath:

¹² Plaut, 149.

¹³ According to the affirmation of the Nicene Creed: *The Book of Common Prayer...according to the use of the Episcopal Church* (The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1977), 358.

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This typological identification goes back, at least implicitly, to Saint Paul, who grounded his theology of justification by faith in a fatal analogy between Father Abraham and God the Father: Because "Abraham believed God," he "did not withhold his own son"; in the same way God "gave [*his Son*] up for all of us" (Romans 4:3, 8:32). The underlying logic of this analogy is spelled out in the Book of Hebrews: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Hebrews 11:17–19).

Christ fulfils this anticipated resurrection by assuming the role, simultaneously, of the victim who is sacrificed and the priest who offers the sacrifice: "When Christ came as a high priest... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11–12). A major problem with this particular line of mystification, it seems to me, is that it subverts an essential dimension of Jesus' prophetic message. One crucial theme of classical Hebrew prophecy is that Yahweh rejects ritual sacrifice. Thus, for example, according to Isaiah:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord;
 I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
 and the fat of fed beasts;...
 [Y]our hands are full of blood.
 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice. (Isaiah 1:11, 16–17)

This radical iconoclasm provides a crucial context for interpreting Jesus's assault on the money-changers in the Jerusalem Temple. This provocative symbolic episode has given rise to a great variety of interpretations, but one thing it clearly *has* to mean that Jesus was believed by his followers to be calling for an end to the practice of ritual slaughter: "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21:12–13; cf. Mark 11:15–17, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–17.) And in the place where "it is written...you are

making it a den of robbers" (Jeremiah 7:11), the prophetic context is especially to the point:

If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow,
or shed innocent blood in this place,
and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,
then I will dwell with you in this place, . . .
Has this house, which is called by my name,
become a den of robbers in your sight?
(Jeremiah 7:6–7, 11; emphasis added)

This is not the occasion to explore the complex process by which Jesus's original prophetic assault on a corrupt establishment was transformed into a theology that actually perverts his teaching and valorizes the notion of atonement by "the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Peter 1:19).¹⁴ This theology of blood sacrifice nurtures the myth of an all-powerful God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son," but who was nonetheless powerless to redeem humanity except by subjecting that Son to brutal and inhuman torment "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Christians sometimes like to indulge the fancy that *our* God of Love has replaced the wrathful, vengeful, angry Yahweh who figures so prominently in the prophetic diatribes of the Hebrew Bible. But in this instance, at least, by any rational moral standard, the God of the so-called New Testament appears vastly inferior to the God of the Old, in roughly the same way that a father who exacts terrible punishment is worse than one who merely threatens it. Christians typically rejoice in this central mystery of our faith, un-ironically, without confronting the horror in which it is rooted. Thus, according to the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the celebrant of Holy Eucharist intones: "Holy and gracious Father: . . . your only and eternal Son . . . stretched out his arms

¹⁴ In brief, the mythology that evolved over the early centuries of the common era yokes Jewish ideas of atonement sacrifice with Hellenic myths about savior gods whose deaths and subsequent resurrections are redemptive for their followers. Even a superficial study of the Orphic mysteries, for example, and of Mithraism, yields striking similarities with the sacred stories told about "our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" (*BCP passim*). Christians who derive their hope for eternal life by drinking the blood of their Savior may unconsciously be imitating the devotees of Mithra, who may have derived strength from drinking the blood of a bull. Stephen Harris remarks: "As Christians were figuratively washed in the 'blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:14), Mithraic initiates were sprinkled and purified with the blood flowing from a sacrificed bull." Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 365.

upon the cross, and offered himself, *in obedience to your will*, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world" (*BCP* 362; emphasis mine). Again, borrowing from Kierkegaard, I would say that this understanding of sacrifice "arouses my admiration, [but] at the same time appalls me."

Islam: "Good news of a forbearing son"

We gave [Abraham] / The good news / Of a forbearing son.

Then, when (the son) / Reached (the age of) / (Serious) work with him, / He said: "O my son! / I have seen in a dream / That I offer thee in sacrifice: / Now see what is / Thy view!"

The son) said: / "O my father! Do / As thou art commanded: / Thou will [sic] find me, / If Allah so wills one / Of the steadfast."

So when they had both / Submitted (to Allah), / And he had laid him / Prostrate on his forehead (For sacrifice),

We called out to him, "O Abraham!

Thou hast already fulfilled / The dream!"—thus indeed Do We reward Those who do right. (*The Holy Qur-ān*, Surat 37:101–105)¹⁵

In my view, myths of child sacrifice—including stories about a child of God who dies to be reborn—are always deeply problematic. In general they have been both a cause and a symptom of a pervasive cultural blindness that haunts the consciousness of Western civilization, leading us again and again to sacrifice our children on the altar of Pride. That, I believe, is the crucial and devastating insight of Wilfred Owen's bleak "Parable of the Old Man and the Young." When Abraham was told to "Offer the Ram of Pride instead" of Isaac, "the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one."¹⁶ Owen's poem articulates the kind of moral horror that results when notions

¹⁵ *The Holy Qur-ān: English translation of the meanings and Commentary*, ed. The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance (Published in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, revised with no date). In the *Qur-ān* version of the story, the son is Ishmael rather than Isaac. According to the commentary in my official Saudi Arabian edition of *The Holy Qur-ān*, "Our version may be compared with the Jewish-Christian version of the present Old Testament. The Jewish tradition, in order to glorify the younger branch of the family, descended from Isaac, ancestor of the Jews, as against the elder branch, descended from Ismā'il, ancestor of the Arabs, refers this sacrifice to Isaac (Gen. xxii. 1–18). . . . During his first 14 years Ismā'il was the *only* son of Abraham; at no time was Isaac the *only* son of Abraham. Yet, in speaking of the sacrifice, the Old Testament says (Gen. xxii. 2): 'And He said, Take now thy son, thine *only* son Issac [sic], whom thou lovest, and . . . offer him . . . for a burnt offering . . .' This slip shows at any rate which was the older version, and how it was overlaid, like the present Jewish records, in the interests of a tribal religion." *Qur-ān*, 1357 note 4101.

¹⁶ Wilfred Owen. *Collected Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), 42.

of nobility and sacrifice blind us to the moral reality of our actions. Such sacrifices nearly always carry within them the pathological seeds of future destruction.¹⁷

What I mean by “cultural blindness” can perhaps be clarified by shifting our focus of attention, briefly, from Abraham to Isaac. In general, the Binding of Isaac is most often represented by both Jewish and Christian expositors as a crucial lesson *for Abraham* in absolute trust. This “natural” interpretation begs the question of Isaac’s role as sacrificial lamb. When he questions his father, “where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham answers: “God himself will *see to* the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:7–8).¹⁸ Apparently Isaac is satisfied by this evasive answer, since we hear nothing further from him. But what a huge abyss of incomprehension that silence invokes: what could Isaac possibly be thinking? If Abraham’s motives in this drama are unexplained, Isaac’s thoughts and feelings are reduced to a cipher. Again, Stephen Mitchell has spoken powerfully to this appalling silence:

As he grew up, Isaac remembered everything but the terror.... [H]e had long since forgotten that [final] moment when he waited, trussed up on the altar, the carving knife quivering against his breast, his father’s huge eyes above him, exalted and horrible. Over the years, as his own eyesight grew dim, the nightmare gradually acquired the details of a pious legend. The demented thought became a heavenly command. The distorted features became an expression of infinite fatherly concern. The abrupt awakening became a miraculous, last-minute reprieve from a God who was only testing, after all.

From these fragments of self-delusion, Mitchell goes on to draw a profoundly disturbing conclusion: “Whatever experiences we cannot bear to be conscious of, we must repeat in all their anguish. Thus Isaac grows blind.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Consider, for example, the sacrifice of Iphigenia that Agamemnon performed in order to prosecute his war against Troy. As a consequence of that action, Agamemnon himself was later sacrificed to Clytemnestra’s maternal hatred, and she was then killed by Orestes to avenge the death of his father. In connection with the Binding of Isaac, it is interesting to note an alternative version of the myth, in which Artemis substitutes a stag for Iphigenia and takes the maiden to the land of the Tauri to be her priestess. This substitution makes no practical difference so far as Agamemnon’s destiny is concerned, however.

¹⁸ Where I have italicized *see to*, NRSV has “provide for”; once again (as in note 3 above) I follow Robert Alter in translating *ra’ah* as a punning reference to *pro-vision*.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Parables* 27.

One way to escape that anguished repetition is to re-imagine Isaac's role in the "momentous sacrifice" (*Qur-ān* 37:107) as, possibly, a *will-ing* participant rather than a helpless victim. A Commentary on Surat 37:103 of the *Qur-ān*, excerpted in the epigraph above, points us in that direction: "the sacrifice was demanded of both Abraham and Ismā'il. It was a trial of the will of the father and the son. By way of trial the father had the command conveyed to him in a vision. He consulted the son. The son readily consented, and offered to stand true to his promise if his self-sacrifice was really required."²⁰

This revisionist way of reading of the story, as a lesson in submission to the will of Allah, tells us less about the son's consciousness than it does about the author's theological perspective.²¹ Nonetheless, it has a crucial point to make about the way sacred texts must be read: the meaning of any spiritual story about God is always necessarily figurative rather than merely literal: "The whole thing is symbolical. Allah does not require the flesh and blood of animals (xxii. 37), much less of human beings. But he does require the giving of our whole being to Allah, the symbol of which is that we should give up something very dear to us, if Duty requires that sacrifice."²²

Ultimately, the notion of Isaac/Ismā'il as a *spiritual* sacrifice does not quite enable me to solve the appalling riddle of Abraham's dilemma, but it does point me in a useful direction. I cannot believe in a God who would ask me to kill my child,²³ but I know that I often misunderstand what God expects of me. I am fearful of responding to a call because I am thinking literally about giving up what I have rather than spiritually about whom I am being invited to become. And so I begin

²⁰ *Qur-ān*, 1357, note 4100.

²¹ According to a note on Surat 37:107, "It was indeed a great and momentous ('*azīm*') occasion, when two men, with concerted will, 'ranged themselves in the ranks' of those to whom self sacrifice in the service of Allah was the supreme thing in life." *Qur-ān*, 1358, note 4103.

²² That sense of Duty, figuratively understood, is what makes the (extra biblical) issue of the son's willing participation such a prominent feature of the story in the *Qur-ān*: "In the Biblical version Isaac's consent is not taken; in fact Isaac asks, 'where is the lamb for sacrifice?' and is told that 'God would provide it'. It is a complete human sacrifice like those to Moloch. In our version it is as much a sacrifice by the will of Ismā'il as by that of Abraham." *Qur-ān*, 1357, note 4100.

²³ I agree with Plaut that "A God who asks [us] what [God]...*appears* to ask [of Abraham] is not the true God but one whom [we] fashion in [our] own image." According to this Midrashic tradition, "it is man who all too frequently is prepared to immolate his offspring to satisfy his own concept of duty and who will restrain his compassion before his own sense of righteousness." 152.

to suspect that Abraham may have failed the test. In his terror and his anguish over the loss of everything he held most precious, his beloved son and his hope for the future, Abraham misheard what God asked of him. What he heard was:

Take your son, your only one [*yachid*], Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Revelation, and OFFER HIM AS A BURNT OFFERING—*vh'alahv l'olah*.

What God actually said was:

Take your son, your darling [*yadid*] Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Revelation, and LIFT HIM UP AS AN OFFERING—*vh'alahv l'alah*.²⁴

What God requires, in other words, is not a sacrifice of the flesh, smoking on the altar, but the whole-hearted offering of the self. Yahweh speaks:

Do you think that I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
Offer instead the sacrifice of a grateful heart,
and make good your vows to the Living God. (Psalms 50:13–14)

The one who hears replies:

In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure;
burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required.
You opened my ears to your words,
so I said: Behold, here am I....
I love to do your will, O God;
your truth abides in my heart. (Psalms 40:7–9)²⁵

What that truth might be is harder to say. I began work on this essay in the hope that by focusing my attention on the *Akedah* I might gain some insight into the psychic and spiritual forces that drive human beings to a perennial orgy of bloodletting. I'm not sure I have been able to do that. I still do not really understand what drives fathers to

²⁴ Compare Plaut's suggestion "that Abraham misunderstood God altogether." He points to a midrash "that has God saying: 'Did I tell you "Slaughter him"? Did I not rather tell you "Bring him up"? [A word play in Hebrew.] You brought him up on the altar, now take him down again!'" (150, citing *Gen. R.* 56:8).

²⁵ The translation of the Psalms is from *New Songs: An Evolving Psalter for People of Faith*, a work in progress by Christina Jarvis, Kari Boyd McBride, John C. Ulreich and Mary Wildner-Bassett. It comprises inclusive revisions of the Psalms based on the versions found in the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*.

immolate their sons, nor do I know why the sons are so willing to go along with the self-sacrificial project: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39).²⁶ I'm still searching for answers to those questions; the project is, as we like to say, a work in progress.

²⁶ Perhaps the original point of the story about Jesus's agony in the Garden, before it became tangled in the dire necessities of atonement theology, was that all real sacrifice is voluntary, even when it entails submission to the inevitable. From that perspective, the story of Christ's Passion reflects, not obedience to God's irrational will, but a sacrifice of the ego to a truer, deeper self. Such sacrifice might also entail giving one's life for the sake of those one loves: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

PART VI

IMPERIALISM, REVOLUTION, AND COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION TO PART VI

Stephen D. Moore

What does it mean to “comment” on scripture? Most often (although it is seldom said), it means *paraphrasing* scripture, and paraphrasing in turn means not merely the restatement of the scriptural text in other words, but its wholesale transformation into a different discursive register. The concrete, graphic, ineluctably imagistic language of the Bible, for instance, has, for millennia, been painstakingly paraphrased as abstract theological and moral propositions; while the Bible’s ancient historical narratives (which incessantly blur the borders between “fiction” and “history”) have, since at least the nineteenth century, been paraphrased as modern historical narratives (which depend precisely on keeping those borders intact). In recent decades, however, the discursive horizons of biblical scholarship have expanded, impelled in no small part by the opening up of biblical studies to literary studies, and this expansion has made previously unimaginable forms of biblical commentary possible.

Although she herself does not describe it as such, Regina Schwartz’s “Revelation and Revolution: Law, Justice, and Politics in the Hebrew Bible” amounts to a *philosophical* commentary on the Sinai narrative of the Book of Exodus. The particular brand of philosophy that resources and contours Schwartz’s paraphrastic retelling of the Sinai story is that of modern (or, if you prefer, postmodern) French philosophy, specifically that of Alain Badiou and Emmanuel Levinas. Badiou writes hauntingly of singular “truth events” that erupt unpredictably into the realm of the mundane, demanding an enduring ethical response and calling new subjects and communities into being. For Schwartz, Sinai is such an event, a narrative imbued with “the aura of the exceptional,” signaling a “radical break from the ordinary.” What is encountered at Sinai is “unintelligible, unnameable, unthinkable,” yet it demands an uncompromising ethical obedience—obedience not to a set of universal imperatives, however, but to an uncategorizable love of God and neighbor. Schwartz further fleshes out this ethical fidelity through appeal to Levinas’s concept of a radical justice irreducible to law. In redescribing the Sinai event in categories culled from contemporary

French philosophy Schwartz defamiliarizes it, peeling back the crust of overfamiliarity that overlays not just the Sinai text but every overread scriptural text. Schwartz thereby reactivates Sinai.

Less common than commentary in traditional biblical scholarship, but a numbingly familiar practice nonetheless, is “history of interpretation.” At its narrowest, such history is a narrative of the inception, reification and dissemination of critical biblical scholarship itself, although it can also range more broadly to chronicle “pre-critical” biblical interpretation in addition. The essays of Boer and Abraham, Conway, and Twomey below each examine the reception history of specific biblical texts, but in novel registers made possible by engagement with contemporary literary and cultural theory.

Scripture *qua* scripture has, of course, incalculable effects on countless lives in both the private and public domains. A further characteristic of scripture is its capacity to confer infinite significance on the relatively insignificant. Paul’s letter to Philemon is the briefest and, arguably, most personal of his letters. What happens when a personal letter attains canonical status? What happens when the very particularity of the letter appears to subvert its scriptural function of providing universal principles by which to live? These are the questions that occupy Colleen Conway in “Supplying the Missing Body of Onesimus: Readings of Paul’s Letter to Philemon.” The letter concerns the relationship between a master and a slave, yet it seems singularly “unscriptural” in its singularity: in place of general pronouncements on slavery (of the kind found elsewhere in the writings that make up the New Testament) we find a cryptic, subtle, and frequently opaque analysis of a specific situation. As scripture, however, the letter has never lacked readers determined to translate its opacity into transparent, divinely-revealed universal principles, and as such has been harnessed by both advocates and opponents of slavery at different times. Conway shows how the clash of the particular and the general, the anecdotal and the universal in Philemon and its reception history can be illuminated by recourse to that heady fusion of “theory” and historiography known as “New Historicism.” In effect, her essay suggests what a New Historicist history of biblical interpretation might look like.

Jay Twomey’s “Antonin Scalia v. Jonathan Edwards: Romans 13 and the American Theology of State” deals with the reception of a less ambiguous Pauline text, one that explicitly enjoins its readers to subject themselves to political authorities since “the powers that be are ordained of God.” Twomey is interested in how this text has been read within

Bible-affirming U.S. Christianity. His contention, however, is that such Christianity has always been internally heterogeneous and unstable. He selects two temporally disparate representatives of it, the eighteenth century theologian Jonathan Edwards and the contemporary Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, and carefully elucidates the differences between their respective readings of Romans 13:1–5. Whereas for Scalia, God operates in or just behind civil government, Edwards's view of the State is more jaundiced. Although Edwards does argue that God originally provided sinful humanity with civil government as an ideal model of order, he stops short of simply collapsing the agency of the State (even that of the United States) into the divine agency, thus leaving a crucial breathing space for Christian critique of government. Twomey undertakes an oddly neglected project in academic biblical studies—critical analysis of the Bible's deployment in U.S. political discourse. This is "history of interpretation" in a cultural studies mode.

Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham's "Noah's Nakedness: Islam, Race and the Fantasy of the Christian West" also tackles the reception history of a specific biblical text, the tale of Noah's drunkenness and the curse of Canaan, commonly misnamed "the curse of Ham" and used historically to legitimate Christian enslavement of blacks and Arabs. Boer and Abraham read the tale, ambitiously and intriguingly, as a political allegory for the system of exclusions that made "ancient Israel" and the "Christian West" conceptually possible. In retrojecting a cursing of Canaan back into its primeval history, they argue, Israel attempted to disavow its own Canaanite origins. In this history Canaan is the father of the Arabs, which enabled Christians in turn to appeal to the curse to disavow Arab-Muslim contributions to the formation of the "Christian West." Boer and Abraham begin their analysis of Arab-Christian entanglements by reflecting on the history of the Spanish Moors, who were an essential conduit for the classical Greek learning that made the "Christian West" possible; and they end by elucidating the vital role that Islam assumes within the marginalized and oppositional subcultures of the contemporary West as the latest return of a religious repressed. With its close attention to the subtle interweaving of ideology, politics and culture, this essay, too, is a bravura exercise in cultural studies.

AFRICAN REWRITINGS OF THE JEWISH AND ISLAMIC
SOLOMONIC TRADITION: THE TRIUMPH OF THE QUEEN
OF SHEBA IN THE ETHIOPIAN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY
TEXT *KĀBRĀ NĀGĀST*

Wendy Laura Belcher

In the fourteenth century, scribes from what is now the modern East African nation of Ethiopia recorded their national narrative in the holy text of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* (The Glory of the Kings or, in the original script ክብረ ነገሥት).¹ Written in their ancient scholarly language Ge'ez (Ethiopic), this thick volume articulates Ethiopian myths of origin, parts of which were told for many centuries before the text's redaction in the fourteenth century.² Expanding on an anecdote found in the Tanakh about the Queen of Sheba's visit to tenth-century BCE King Solomon,³ the *Kābrā Nāgāst* devotes forty chapters (of over one hundred total chapters)⁴ to reimagining the brief diplomatic encounter. The *Kābrā Nāgāst* envisions Solomon seducing and impregnating an Ethiopian woman called Makadda (ማከዳ), the Queen of Saba (Sheba). This queen then gives birth to a son who takes the ark of the covenant from the Israelites and starts a new Zion through the unbroken descent of their emperors from Solomon and Makadda. The mythical history

¹ The title of the book is actually the title of the first chapter, which has been used as the title since the fifteenth century because the whole has no title, see Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: Volume 3: He-N*, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 364. Also, the letters of the words *Kābrā Nāgāst* are a transliteration from Ge'ez, which has its own orthography. The title is thus transliterated variously in English, sometimes *Kābrā Nāgāst*, *Kābrā Nāgāst*, *Kebre Negast*, *Kebra Nagast*, *Kebre Nagast*, *Kibre Negest*, *kebranaghast*, and so on.

² To avoid confusion, I am referring to the peoples of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* as Ethiopians, although this is ahistorical and a conflation of various ethnicities and traditions. The peoples discussed in this paper are better called the Habasha or highland Ethiopians. In medieval and early modern documents in English, they were called Abyssinians.

³ In the Tanakh, the story is found in I Kings 10:1–13 (redacted around 600 BCE) and in II Chronicles 9:1–12 (redacted around 400 BCE).

⁴ Chapters 21–63, 84–94, 113–117 of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* address the Solomon and Makadda story. The other chapters are as follows: the first twenty chapters are an introduction; chapters 64 to 67 describe Solomon's misadventures with other foreign women and his dying regrets, chapters 68 to 83 relate the history of a number of other kings, and chapters 95 to 113 are unrelated prophecies.

of the *Käbrä Nägäst* probably arises from Ethiopia's actual history as the ruler of a succession of trade-based African empires in close contact with Jewish South Arabians starting in the first millennium BCE and as a Christian African nation since the fourth century CE. In this essay, I address how the *Käbrä Nägäst* narrative varies from the biblical, qur'anic, and midrashic versions of the queen's visit, particularly in its placement of a powerful and wise African woman at the center of the tale.

The History of the Text of the Käbrä Nägäst

The remarkable Ethiopian narrative about Solomon and Makädda "must be one of the most powerful and influential national sagas anywhere in the world," writes the historian Edward Ullendorff.⁵ It enabled a seven-hundred year dynasty of 111 emperors (the Solomonic dynasty) and has lost no vigor despite the dynasty's fall from power in 1974. The narrative has been retold continuously for at least a thousand years, is still widely believed by tens of millions of modern Ethiopians, and was written into the Ethiopian constitution of 1955 as historical truth.⁶ Tens of thousands in the African diaspora also believe in it, through the diasporic religion of Rastafarianism.⁷ When Solomonic dynasty member Haile Sellasie I was crowned emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, some saw this ascent as the fulfillment of Marcus Garvey's prophecy that an African king would be crowned to save Africans around the world. Followers saw Ras Tafari (Haile Sellassie's name before being crowned) as the true inheritor of the spiritual kingdom of King Solomon and the new Zion, and Solomon's other lineal descendent, Jesus.⁸ Main elements of the story have become parts of twentieth-century popular culture, through the Indiana Jones films, the best-selling *Da Vinci Code*, and

⁵ Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 64.

⁶ *Revised Constitution of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1953) Article 2, p. 3: "The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line...[which] descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Jerusalem." Cited in Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17.

⁷ Dereck Daschke and W. Michael Ashcraft, *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁸ Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates (eds.), *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 1591–1593.

Umberto Eco's novel *Baudolino*.⁹ Wild speculation continues in books, films, and websites, about the location of the ark of the covenant, most of which mention the Ethiopian claim to possess it.¹⁰ The narrative shows no signs of waning in power despite four centuries of European scholarship repeatedly "disproving" it.

For instance, many scholars of antiquity insist that there is no record that Solomon or the Queen of Sheba existed.¹¹ Among those who believe that the evidence has yet to surface, or who conjecture that royal figures like them may have existed, there is a debate about whether the Queen of Sheba was from modern-day Yemen (South Arabia) or Ethiopia.¹² This debate depends largely on making a somewhat artificial distinction between the two places, due to modern mental maps that construct a chasm between Africa and the Middle East. The distance between the two is no more than 300 miles and they have a history of interaction and intermarriage going back three thousand years. Both Ethiopia and Yemen have an archeological record of having queens, both participated in kingdoms called Saba, both traded in frankincense and myrrh, both grew coffee and qāt, and both worshipped sun gods. Further, both have long insisted that the Queen of Sheba came from their land. As the historian Richard Pankhurst has suggested, given their mutual history, perhaps she came from both, a queen who ruled

⁹ None mention Ethiopia or the Queen of Sheba, but elements of the story are present in all of them.

¹⁰ For diametrically opposed explorations of the possibility of the ark being in Ethiopia, see Graham Hancock, *Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Quest for the Ark of the Covenant: The True History of the Tablets of Moses* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). Hancock, *Sign and the Seal*, is extremely speculative.

¹¹ See reviews of this discussion in Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). Some said that if Solomon and Sheba existed, they did not exist at the same time, as the kingdoms named Saba in South Arabia and the Ethiopian highlands date to 700–500 BC, too late for a story involving Solomon in 950 BCE. Others say that this late date for Saba is not correct and that it did exist from 1200 BCE. "For a time scholars were divided between Alright, Van Beek, and Jamme, who proposed a high date (1300–1100 BC) for the beginning of Sabeian culture and those who followed J. Ryckmans and J. Pirenne in preferring a low date (550–500 BC).... but...excavations and radiocarbon dates...vindicate the advocates of a high dating" Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*, 92.

¹² See Bowers Museum, "The Queen of Sheba: Legend or Reality: Treasures from the British Museum," Bowers Museum, www.bowers.org, J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974), K.A. Kitchen, "Sheba and Arabia," in *The Age of Solomon*, ed. L.K. Handy (Leiden: Brill, 1997), and, for another view Appiah and Gates (eds.), *Africana*, Queen of Sheba entry.

over a kingdom of several hundred square miles.¹³ Ethiopian scholars continue to insist that she is from Ethiopia because (1) the legend of the Queen of Sheba has been much stronger and more persistent in Ethiopia than in Yemen, (2) she is revered not as a mythical figure but as a real person in Ethiopia, and (3) first-century Egyptians thought that "Egypt and Ethiopia" were the land of the Queen of Sheba.¹⁴

Shadowing the debate about where the queen came from, or even if she existed, is an ongoing debate about the dating of the *Kabrä Nägäst*. A considerable amount of scholarly speculation has attended the text, some dating its earliest versions to the first century, others to the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Very recently, however, the late scholar Stuart Munro-Hay published a survey of early documents related to the *Kabrä Nägäst*.¹⁶ He argues that the story of the *Kabrä Nägäst* has changed quite a bit over time, with some elements dating to the first century and others dating to as late as the sixteenth century. One can conjecture from his findings, then, that the Ethiopians have been continually expanding and altering

¹³ "Traditions associated with her are common to both [Ethiopia and Yemen], and point to the existence of an at least partially shared culture, dating back to early antiquity" Richard Pankhurst, "Let's Look across the Red Sea," *Addis Tribune*, January 17, 2003. During a visit to England in 1954, when he was asked about the tradition of the Kebra Nagast, [Haile Selassie] replied forcefully: "This is not a legend. It is based on the most universal book in the world—the holy Bible" as paraphrased in David Allan Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*" (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of St. Andrews, 1957), 5.

¹⁴ Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: United Printers, 1972), 42.

¹⁵ Those who date the *Kabrä Nägäst* quite early are E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba & Her Only Son Menyelek; Being the History of the Departure of God & His Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the Establishment of the Religion of the Hebrews & the Solomonic Line of Kings in That Country*, First ed. (London, Boston, MA: Medici Society Limited, 1922) (second century); Franz Praetorius, *Fabula De Regina Sabaea Apud Aethiopes* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1870), Irfan Shahid, "The Kebra Nagast in the Light of Recent Research," *Le Museon* 89 (1976) (sixth century); Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*," D.W. Johnson, "Dating the Kebra Nagast. Another Look," in *Peace and War in Byzantium*, eds. T.S. Miller and J. Nesbitt (Washington D.C.: 1995) (seventh century), and Sidney Smith, "Events in Arabia in the 6th Century A.D.," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16, no. 3 (1954). Those who argue for a later date, usually between 1314 and 1322, are the earlier scholars Carlo Conti Rossini, Erno Littmann, and Enrico Cerulli, as well as Stuart C. Munro-Hay, "A Sixth Century Kebra Nagast," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 17 (2001), Munro-Hay, *Quest*, Jean Doresse, *L'empire Du Prêtre-Jean*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1957). On dating, see also Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* V. 3, 364–368; Robert Beylot, "Du Kebra Nägäst," *Aethiopica: International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 7 (2004).

¹⁶ Munro-Hay, *Quest*.

this narrative over almost two millennia. A true palimpsest, it embodies the varying, sometimes contradictory, concerns of different times.

One of these versions of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* was written down just before 1322 by ይሥሐቅ (pronounced Yishāḳ or Isaac), the leading ecclesiastical officer of the ancient city of Aksum, working with five orthodox monks named Yamharana-ʾAb, Hezba-Krestos, Andrew, Philip, and Mahari-ʾAb.¹⁷ The emperor of the Ethiopians at this time was Amda Tseyon (meaning Pillar of Zion) (r. 1314–1344), the first emperor to have his exploits recorded in the Ethiopian Royal Chronicles and often considered the founder of the Solomonic line.¹⁸ The colophon of the earliest version extant of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* states that the redactors were translating a 1225 Christian Arabic text.¹⁹ It also states that this Arabic text was in turn a translation from an even earlier Christian Coptic (Egyptian) text. Some speculate that this Coptic text was, in turn, a translation of a very early now lost Geʾez text.²⁰

The first full-length, print version of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* was published in 1905 by the German scholar Carl Bezold, based on a possibly fifteenth-century copy of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and six other manuscripts dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century (one of which the English explorer James Bruce brought back with him from Abyssinia).²¹ The first full-length English translation was published in 1922 by the famous Orientalist Sir E.A.W.

¹⁷ “According to the colophons of the Mss. in the British Museum, Oxford, and Paris, the Arabic translation was made from the Coptic in the 409th ‘year of mercy’, when Gabra Maskal, commonly known as Lālibalā, was reigning over Ethiopia, i.e. between A.D. 1314 and 1344.” Budge, *KN*, viii. “There seems no reason to doubt that the mention of Yaʾibika Egzi, Yeshaq and his companions, and Abu al-Faraj and Abu al-ʾIzz, are genuine, and that they had their part to play in the earliest origins of what became the *Kābrā Nāgāst*” Munro-Hay, *Quest*, 81.

¹⁸ Chernetsov has speculated that the *Kābrā Nāgāst* was invented by a local king who rebelled against this very emperor; see S.B. Chernetsov, *Efiopskaja Feodalʾnaja Monarhija V Xiii–Xvi Vv (Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in the 13th–16th Century)* (Moscow: Izdat. Nauka, 1982).

¹⁹ Budge, *KN*, 228–229. The many Arabic words in the text suggest that it was partly based on some Arabic sources, but the high quality of the Geʾez suggests that it is an original literary work in Geʾez; see Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* V. 3, 367.

²⁰ Shahid, “The Kebra Nagast in the Light of Recent Research”, Doresse, *L’empire Du Prêtre-Jean*.

²¹ Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast, Die Kerklichkeit Der Könige: Nach Den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris* (München: K.B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905). The various manuscripts closely resembled each other; for instance, all have the same chapters and paragraphs; all are in the same order. Only words here or there changed, seemingly due to scribal errors. See also Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* V. 3, 365.

Budge, based on Bezold's edition. Although Budge's translation has been critiqued linguistically, it is an outstanding literary translation. The King James language that Budge uses is fully in the spirit of the original, which depends so heavily on biblical sources and themes. Finally, in a twentieth-century visual form, the story of the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* is now frequently painted in strip cartoon style in Ethiopia, with forty-four episodes depicted from left to right, including the bedroom scenes.

The evidence that Munro-Hay collected suggests that the fourteenth-century orthodox Christian priests, who had memorized many parts of the Old and New Testament, were working with other sources. How close they remained to them is an open question. Perhaps it was direct, perhaps it was loose, like Chaucer's borrowing from French and Italian writing during the same period.²² Certainly, they or previous redactors combined biblical passages with local legends to expand on an anecdote that also appeared in Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek texts.²³ The many Ethiopian storytellers who participated in the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*'s construction demonstrated themselves to be rhetorical masters, using mimicry to construct a unique identity and fabricating a bricolage of cultural materials into a national myth that resolved eternal conflicts about Ethiopian identity. The *Kəbrä Nəgäst* provides a rationale for why Ethiopian Christianity was so Jewish, why the Ethiopians looked both African and Arab, and why a seemingly ordinary place was so extraordinarily important in world history. The narrative personalizes the Ethiopians' hybrid heritage by portraying two fore parents, one Israelite, one African. The Ethiopians have ruled more than one trading empire based on long-distance trade—this narrative represents that history of sea-faring commerce through several long trips to traffic in wealth and knowledge. The Ethiopians have had queens as rulers—here is one. The Ethiopians conquered Yemen in the sixth century—this narrative depicts their capturing the power of a Middle Eastern country across the sea. Finally, the Ethiopians have long had more recognizably Jewish practices than other Christian groups. The Ethiopian emperor was titled the "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah"; the architecture of the Ethiopian church is based on the tripartite divisions of the Judaic temple and is always built on a hill; the Ethiopians divide animals into

²² Seth Lerer, *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

²³ Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, 143–144.

clean and unclean; and so on.²⁴ In all these ways, the *Kābrā Nāgāst* simultaneously establishes its legitimating connections to other cultures and declares its exceptionality among them. The goal of the many inventors and re-tellers over time was to construct a national narrative—not to describe historical truths, but to represent them.

The Story of the Kābrā Nāgāst

Although elements of the *Kābrā Nāgāst*'s main narrative are mentioned in ancient Jewish and Islamic texts, the majority of the actual text of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* is unique. To make this point clear, let me describe two other Solomon and Sheba narratives before turning to the *Kābrā Nāgāst*. In the elliptical, thirty-line Islamic version in the *Qur'an*, written in the seventh century CE, a talking bird tells Solomon about a wealthy kingdom to the East ruled by a queen who worships the sun and whose guide is Satan.²⁵ Solomon sends the bird to the queen with a letter demanding her presence at his court. The queen consults with her officials and (fearing the invasion of a foreign army) sends instead a gift by messenger. Solomon is angry with the gift and again demands the queen's submission. He then plots with his demons to steal her throne (perhaps since he cannot take it after she becomes a believer). When the queen arrives, she is presented with her own throne, which has been disguised by the demons and been transported to Solomon's kingdom before she arrives. She neither asserts that it is hers nor denies it. They then ask her to enter "a court paved with glass," which the naïve queen mistakes for water. She raises her skirts to cross, "exposing her legs." She then abandons her worship of the sun to worship Solomon's god. The whole story takes up less than a chapter.

A very similar version of the qur'anic story appears in the *Targum Sheni*, a Jewish commentary on the book of Esther.²⁶ Which came first—the *Qur'an* or the *Targum Sheni*—is much disputed, with the

²⁴ Edward Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1956).

²⁵ In the *Qur'an*, the story is found in Sura 27:15–45 (redacted in the 600s CE). It is possible that some versions of this story originated in Iran, see Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*", 291.

²⁶ Bernard Grossfeld (ed.), *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated with Apparatus and Notes* (Edinburgh, Scotland/Collegeville, MN: T&T Clark; Liturgical Press, 1991).

latter being dated anywhere from the second to the thirteenth century.²⁷ That they are related is clear, since their stories proceed in nearly the same way and often with the same phrasing. The *Targum Sheni*, however, does not mention demons or thrones and clarifies the meaning of the conclusion:

when the Queen saw that the king was sitting in a bathhouse, she thought to herself the king must be sitting in water. So she raised her dress to wade across. Whereupon he noticed the hair on her leg, to which King Solomon responded by saying: "Your beauty is the beauty of women, but your hair is the hair of men. Now hair is beautiful for a man but shameful for a woman."²⁸

In both the *Qur'an* and *Targum Sheni*, the shame of exposure leads the queen to convert. These less than positive depictions inspired later midrashim stories that correlate the Queen of Sheba with the demonic Lilith and later Islamic tales that depict her as the daughter of a demon.²⁹

As the following demonstrates, the various Islamic and Judaic versions differ from the *Kābrā Nāgäst* version not just in length, but in their featuring a foolish, humiliated, and powerless queen alongside a conniving, magically empowered king who steals the queen's totem. In stark contrast, the Ethiopian version in the *Kābrā Nāgäst* features a wise, virtuous, wealthy, and powerful African queen who takes a sinful king's totem.

Since the Ethiopian story is not well known, it is worthwhile to summarize it. The main narrative of the *Kābrā Nāgäst* does not begin with the Middle Eastern King Solomon, but with the African Queen of Sheba. Further, it starts by praising her. This is the *Kābrā Nāgäst's* depiction:

እስመ ዘከርዋ ወንጌላዊያን ለይሁዳ ብእሲት . . . ወዘይቤ ንግሥተ አዜብ ንግሥተ ኢትዮጵያ ይእቲ . . . ወይ እቲስ ንግሥተ አዜብ ሠናይት ጥቁ ብራእያኒ ብላ

²⁷ There is a heated online debate about whether the *Qur'an* is based on the midrash, or the midrash based on the *Qur'an*. See, for instance, Nisar Muhammad, M.S.M. Saifullah, and Elias Karim, "Is the Qur'anic Story of Solomon and Sheba from the Targum Sheni?," Islamic Awareness, <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Sources/BBsheba.html>, Jameel, "Is the Qur'an's Story of Solomon & Sheba from the Jewish Targum?," Answering Islam, <http://answering-islam.org.uk/Responses/Saifullah/sheba.htm>.

²⁸ Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*.

²⁹ For more on this progression from historical figure to demon, see Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

ሕያኒ ወበአእምሮ ወልቡና ዘወሃባ እግዚአብሔር ከመ ትሐር ኢየሩሳሌም ከመ ትስ ማእ ጥበቢሁ ለሰሎሞን . . . ወይእቲስ ባዕልት ጥቀ ብዘወሃባ እግዚአብሔር ክብረ ወ ብዕለ ወርቀ ወብሩረ ወአልባስ ክቡረ ወአግማለ ወአግብርተ ወነጋድያነ ወይነግዱ ላቲ ባሕረ ወየብስ ወህንደኬ ወአስዋን³⁰

And this Queen of the South of whom he [Jesus] spake [in the New Testament] was the Queen of Ethiopia. . . . And this Queen of the South was very beautiful in face, and her stature was superb, and her understanding and intelligence, which God had given her, were of such high character that she went to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon. . . . And moreover, she was exceedingly rich, for God had given her glory, and riches, and gold, and silver, and splendid apparel, and camels, and slaves, and trading men (or, merchants). And they carried on her business and trafficked for her by sea and by land, and in India, and in Aswāan (Syene [in Egypt]).³¹

In this Ethiopian version, one of the queen's traders, Tamrin, supplied Solomon with goods to build his temple and was so impressed by Solomon that, when he returned to the Ethiopian highlands, he spent every morning telling the queen of the king's wisdom and righteousness. She values these qualities so highly that she "was struck dumb with wonder at the things that she heard from her merchant her servant, and . . . she wept by reason of the greatness of her pleasure in those things that Tamrin told her."³² As an intellectual and moral project, she decides on her own initiative to undertake the long and dangerous journey to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem. No magical birds or demanding Solomonic letters figure in the *Kābrā Nāgāst*. As in the earliest version of the story, it is her choice to visit him.³³

The *Kābrā Nāgāst* emphasizes that Makadda lacked neither power nor goods; she travels because she is in love with wisdom, "the best

³⁰ Bezold, KN, 12. All Ge'ez quotes from the *Kābrā Nāgāst* are from this edited volume.

³¹ Budge, KN, 17. All English quotes from the *Kābrā Nāgāst* are from this translation, done by the famous Orientalist Sir E.A.W. Budge.

³² Ibid., 20. In the original text and script, the quote appears as ወታስተደምም በዘሰ ምዕት እምሃባ ነጋዱ ገብራ . . . ወትበኪ እምብዝኅ Bezold, KN, 14.

³³ Josephus, for instance, says "When this queen heard of the virtue and prudence of Solomon, she had a great mind to see him; and the reports that went every day abroad induced her to come to him, she being desirous to be satisfied by her own experience, and not by a bare hearing; (for reports thus heard are likely enough to comply with a false opinion, while they wholly depend on the credit of the relaters); so she resolved to come to him." Flavius Josephus, *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian*, trans. William Whiston (London: Printed by W. Bowyer for Whiston, 1737), Book 8, chapter 6.

of all treasures.”³⁴ When she arrives with her marvelous gifts, the two rulers share many intense, existential philosophical conversations. “Are we not all nothingness,” Solomon asks her, “mere grass of the field, which withereth in its season and is burnt in the fire?”³⁵ As a result of these thoughtful exchanges, not a trick, the queen turns from the worship of idols to the true God, YHWH, and, after six months, prepares to go home. Her conversion is the result of reasoned inquiry, not shame at her lack of sophistication or womanliness. There are no riddles or games.

Here the Ethiopian version so radically departs from the Judaic and Islamic versions that it can no longer be compared. In the Tanakh (Hebrew Old Testament), the queen simply returns home, in the *Qurʾan*, the story ends without any statement about her future. In the Ethiopian version, the main body of the story all lies ahead, the subject of many chapters.

First, Solomon decides to beget a child upon Makadda before she leaves so that his “children shall inherit the cities of the enemy.”³⁶ As a pure woman, the queen resists the king’s advances and attempts to thwart his colonial ambitions by asking him to promise that he will not take her “by force.”³⁷ He replies that he will not take her “by force” if she does not take anything of his “by force.”³⁸ The queen laughs and reminds him that she has no reason to steal anything, as “my own kingdom is as wealthy as thine.”³⁹ She is the model of an intelligent, politically independent, diplomatically skilled woman who makes her own decisions.

The two retire to their separate beds having both foresworn any possession. In the night, the queen wakes with a terrible thirst because Solomon “in his wisdom” had her dinner heavily spiced and salted.⁴⁰ When she sneaks to pick up a bedside bowl filled with water, the king pounces before she can drink. The queen ineffectively protests, insisting it is only water, but he replies, “Is there anything that thou hast

³⁴ Budge, KN, 22. ትኔይስ እምነ ኩሉ መዛግብት Bezold, KN, 15.

³⁵ Budge, KN, 27. አኮነ ኩልነ ከንቱ ሣዕረ ገዳም ዘበጊዜሃ ይየብስ ወያውዕዮ እሳት Bezold, KN, 19.

³⁶ Budge, KN, 31. ደቂቅየ ይረሱ አህጉረ ፀር Bezold, KN, 22.

³⁷ Budge, KN, 33. ከመ ኢይትጎዮልኪ Bezold, KN, 24.

³⁸ Budge, KN, 33. ከመ ኢትትጎዮል, and ከመ ኢይትጎዮል Bezold, KN, 24.

³⁹ Budge, KN, 34. ወመንግሥትየኒ ብዕልት ... ወአልቦ ዘይትጎጥአኒ Bezold, KN, 25.

⁴⁰ Budge, KN, 34. በጥበቡ Bezold, KN, 25.

seen under the heavens that is better than water?”⁴¹ She acknowledges her “sin” and frees him from his promise so long as he allows her to satisfy her desperate dryness. He agrees, she drinks, and then Solomon has “his will with her.”⁴²

This would seem to be an odd story for the Ethiopians to tell on themselves. Why memorialize a trick? It is a more sophisticated trick than that of the Islamic or Jewish versions, but still a trick. Why record a foreigner’s successful deception, a betrayed treaty? Why tell this hoary tale of a powerful man ruining a pure woman? Because the story does not end there. Indeed, it is only the beginning of a story of revenge so total and absolute that there may be no national equivalent. The Ethiopian version strips the Israelites of every one of their powers and carries off their birthright forever.

During that night with Solomon, Makadda conceives a child. After the conception, when Solomon falls asleep, he is visited by a fateful dream in which a “brilliant sun” hanging over Israel suddenly departs and flees to the Ethiopian highlands.⁴³ There it shines “with exceedingly great brightness forever, for it willed to dwell there.”⁴⁴ When he awakes, he remembers little of the dream but is left with an “agitated mind.”⁴⁵ Thus does Solomon’s fate begin inexorably to unfold.

The queen, who miraculously remains “undefiled in her virginity,”⁴⁶ prefiguring Mary, returns home and gives birth to a son called **በኀሌአክም** (Bayna Lehkem) or **በኖ ላካኪም** (Ebna-Lahakim, or Ibn al-Hakim, meaning the son of a wise man).⁴⁷ A black madonna, she raises the child in the ways of wisdom and YHWH. Whatever Makadda may think of Solomon, she has embraced the Hebrew God entirely. When the child comes of age, she anoints him the king of the Ethiopians. He begs to know his father, so she reluctantly sends him, at the age of

⁴¹ Budge, *KN*, 35. **ቦኑ ዘርእኪ ዘይኹይስ እምነ ማይ ቦታሕተ ሰማይ፤** Bezold, *KN*, 25.

⁴² Budge, *KN*, 35. **ገብረ ፈቃዶ** Bezold, *KN*, 25.

⁴³ Budge, *KN*, **ፀሐይ ብሩህ** Bezold, *KN*, 25. The Ethiopians were sun-worshippers before Christianity, so this image has symbolic meaning. “And the Queen said, “From this moment I will not worship the sun, but will worship the Creator of the sun, the God of Israel” Budge, *KN*, 29.

⁴⁴ Budge, *KN*, 35. **ወክብርሀት ፈድፋደ እስከ ለዓለም እስመ አፍቀረት ነቢረ ህየ።** Bezold, *KN*, 25.

⁴⁵ Budge, *KN*, 36. **ወተመስጠት ሕሊናሁ** Bezold, *KN*, 26.

⁴⁶ Budge, *KN*, 36. **ወንጽሕት በድንግልናሃ** Bezold, *KN*, 26.

⁴⁷ His throne name, given by Solomon, is David. The name given to him in more recent versions of the *Kebra Nagast* is **ምኒልክ** or Menelik.

twenty-two, to Israel for training in statesmanship and law.⁴⁸ Everyone there is impressed with the handsome young man, who looks exactly like Solomon and turns out to be, importantly, Solomon's eldest son.⁴⁹ The text emphasizes the father and son's physical similarity, "every member of his whole body is like unto thine."⁵⁰ Only later in the story does difference come in, when the high priest remarks to Bayna Lehkem that it is not a problem that "ye are black of face" and much later when Solomon's new consort reflects back on Makadda as "not of thy color, ... [but] black."⁵¹

Solomon begs Bayna Lehkem to stay and inherit the Israelite throne, calling him a second David, but Bayna Lehkem lacks such colonial desires and insists on returning home.⁵² Many debaters attempt to convince him but, like his mother, the young philosopher reminds the foreigners of the wealth of his own country and convincingly argues that his home is a better place: "the mountains of the land of my mother where I was born are far better in my sight."⁵³ When Solomon still pleads with him, saying a daughter belongs with her mother and a son with his father, Bayna Lehkem answers that it is impossible for him to stay "for my mother made me to swear by her breasts that I would not remain here but would return to her quickly, and also that I would not marry a wife here."⁵⁴ Young Bayna Lehkem holds his discursive own against the best minds of the land and all its foreign temptations. His allegiance to his mother's (African) nation over his father's (Middle Eastern) nation is unwavering.

So Solomon reverts to his original plan to colonize other countries through his seed. He allows Bayna Lehkem to return, but first blesses him, anoints him king of the Ethiopians (as did Bayna Lehkem's own mother already), and bequeaths him incredible wealth. Then, in an extraordinary act, he bestows on Bayna Lehkem the first-born sons of all the royal Israelites. He orders their parents to allow these twenty-

⁴⁸ Budge, KN, 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41, 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41. መከያክ ይመስል በኩሉ ፍጹም አባል ዘይትማሰለክ Bezold, KN, 29.

⁵¹ Budge, KN, 133, 87. Mother and son are clearly Ethiopian: the *Käbrä Nägäst* uses the Ge'ez word for "Ethiopia" over a hundred and fifty times; multiple place names unique to the Ethiopian Highlands appear; the boundaries of the Ethiopian kingdom are accurately described. See, for instance, Budge, KN, 163.

⁵² Budge, KN, 43.

⁵³ Ibid., 49. ይኔይሰኔ አድባረ ምድራ ለእምየ ኀበ ተወለድኩ Bezold, KN, 35.

⁵⁴ Budge, KN, 48, 51. እስመ አምሕሎ አምሐላተኔ እምየ በአጥባቲሃ ከመ ኢይቁም ዝየ አላ እግባእ ኀቤሃ ፍጡነ ወበዝየኔ ኢያውስብ ብእሲተ Bezold, KN, 36.

one young men to travel to the Ethiopian highlands: “Come, O ye councilors and officers, . . . we shall have two kingdoms; I will rule here with you, and our children shall reign there.”⁵⁵ Whereas his mother left Israel with only worldly goods, Bayna Lehkem is departing with the best of the Israelites themselves, an entire generation of nobles (much like the biblical Nebuchadnezzar and sixth-century CE Axumite king Ella-Asbeha did).⁵⁶

The Israelites think the king is mad—“they cursed the King secretly and reviled him because he had seized their sons against their will”—but the plan goes forward.⁵⁷ The high priest promises Bayna Lehkem that if he continues to follow the true God of the Hebrews, the nations will “bow down to thee [and] to thy sovereignty” and “the brilliance of thy glory shall be before all the nations of the earth.”⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the first-born sons are not so sanguine and gather secretly to talk about how they can ensure their future in a strange land.⁵⁹ They decide to take the most sacred object of their fathers, the totem that confers all the Israelites’ power, the Ark of the Covenant, a gilded wooden chest in which the original ten commandments are stored.⁶⁰

The description of this theft in the *Kabrā Nāgāst* is detailed, even filmic, in a way that none of the other early versions are. Like a novel, the plotting of the transfer of the ark of the covenant involves named characters and technological feats. Through layered deception, the Israelite royal sons take the ark, replace it with a facsimile, and disguise the real ark by securing it “upon a wagon together with a mass of worthless stuff, and dirty clothes.”⁶¹ In a reverse exodus, the group

⁵⁵ Budge, KN, 51. ወኩልከሙ መማከርት ወመኳንንት . . . ወይከውን ለነ ክልኤ መንግሥት ወአንሰ ምስሌከሙ በዝዩ እትለአክ ወደቂቅነሂ ይነግሱ በህዩ። Bezold, KN, 37.

⁵⁶ Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian king, conquered Jerusalem in 586 BCE and captured a number of Jews, including Daniel, as told in the books of Daniel 1:1, 2; and Jeremiah 27:19; 40:1. He is also reputed to have captured or destroyed the ark of the covenant.

⁵⁷ Budge, KN, 63. ወይረግምዎ በኅቡእ ለንጉሥ ወየሐምደዎ በእንተ ዘሄደ ደቂቆሙ ዘእንበለ ፈቃዶሙ Bezold, KN, 46.

⁵⁸ Budge, KN, 57. ወይሰግዱ ለከ ውስተ ገጸ ምድር ለመንግሥትከ . . . ወከመ ኮከበ ጽባሕ ብርሃነ ክብርከ በቅድመ ኩሉ አሕዛብ ምድር Bezold, KN, 40–41.

⁵⁹ Budge, KN, 66.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66. According to the Tanakh, the ark contained the ten commandments: “The gold covered ark of the covenant . . . contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant” Exodus 24:10–22; Hebrews 9:4.

⁶¹ Budge, KN, 73. ውስተ ሰረገላ በኅሱራት ንዋያት ወርሱላት አልባስ ምስለ ንዋየ ቊሳ ቋሳት Bezold, KN, 53–54.

then departs for Aksum with the ark, unbeknownst to the whole city and even Bayna Lehkem.⁶²

In a premonition, Solomon feels troubled as he watches the caravan leave the city. He senses that the plot to spread his power has miscarried and mourns that “From this moment our glory hath passed away, and our kingdom hath been carried off unto a strange people.... From this time forth the law and wisdom and understanding shall be given unto them.”⁶³ When the treachery regarding the ark is uncovered, Solomon rises in wrath to pursue them, but God has magically delivered the party.⁶⁴ In one of the very few magical instances in the book, God enables them like Moses to “march through the sea as upon dry land,” to walk beneath a cloud that “hid them from the fiery heat of the sun,” and to ride “raised above the ground to the height of a cubit.”⁶⁵ They levitated home, we are told, “like an eagle when his body glideth above the wind.”⁶⁶ For it was not through the noble sons that the ark was safely taken and transported, “but by the Will of God.”⁶⁷ This magical transportation signals divine approval of the geographical shift in power.

When the son Bayna Lehkem is told of the deception, at first he is fearful. Could it really be that the God of the Hebrews had “remembered... we the castaways, the people whom Thou hast rejected?”⁶⁸ But then he dances for joy, accepting the transfer of the Israelites’ power to his people, the transformation of the city of Aksum into the new Zion.⁶⁹ After a long fruitless pursuit, Solomon sadly returns to Jerusalem and makes the Israelite priests vow to never reveal the loss to anyone so that the “uncircumcised people may not boast themselves over us.”⁷⁰ Solomon is never the same, becoming so weak that he lusts for impure foreign women and converts to worshipping foreign gods. The ark now resides in that most sacred of Ethiopian sites, the Church of Mary

⁶² Budge, KN, 77.

⁶³ Ibid., 74–75. ወምይእዚስ ኅለፈት ክብርን ወተሀይደት መንግሥትን ውስተ ሕዝብ ነኪ. ር...እምይእዚስ ይትወሀሮሙ ህሕግ ወጥብብ ወአእምሮ Bezold, KN, 55.

⁶⁴ Budge, KN, 86.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77 በባሕርኒ አኬዶሙ ከመ የብስ...ደመና አንጦሊያ ሰወሮሙ ላህበ ፀሐይ...ተ ልዒሎ እምድር መጠነ እመት Bezold, KN, 57.

⁶⁶ Budge, KN, 78. ወከመ ንስር ሶበ ያቀልል ሥጋሁ በመልዕልተ ነፋስ Bezold, KN, 57.

⁶⁷ Budge, KN, 78. አላ በፈቃድ እግዚአብሔር Bezold, KN, 58.

⁶⁸ Budge, KN, 79. ትዜከረን...ለግዱፋን እለ መነንክ Bezold, KN, 58.

⁶⁹ Budge, KN, 80.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 99. ከመ ኢይትመክሁ ቈላፋን ሕዝብ ላዕሌን Bezold, KN, 74.

Zion in Aksum—so say the scribes of the *Kābrā Nāgāst*.⁷¹ The narrative continues with further tales about Makədda and Bayna Lehkem, now the Ethiopian King David.

The *Kebra Nagast*'s kernel—the idea of a wise king meeting an independent southern queen—is clearly based on the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Tanakh (redacted in 600 and 400 BCE respectively).⁷² Although the *Kebra Nagast* main narrative is much longer than the Tanakh version, forty chapters instead of just one, it contains all the basic details of the Tanakh version: the Queen's wealth and mission, the meals the monarchs shared, their meeting of wisdom, and Solomon's presents. Perhaps most important, it shares a historical rather than magical tone.

What is the meaning of these similarities and differences among the Jewish, Islamic, and African Christian versions of the Solomon and Sheba story? Did the story start in Ethiopia and then circulate through the Middle East and Africa, or the other way around? Attempts to reduce the *Kābrā Nāgāst* to an entirely derivative text will never be successful—too much of the Solomon and Makədda narrative is unique. A Ge'ez loan word in the seventh-century qur'anic version suggests that an Ethiopian tradition about the queen predates the *Qur'an*.⁷³ Regardless of origin, the Ethiopians have devoted the most time to embellishing the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, converting it slowly but surely into a story of Ethiopian exceptionalism. Indeed, the development of the story may mimic its plot, in which the Ethiopians carry off the precious cargo of another culture to convert it into a symbol of their own power. Certainly, the version celebrating an Ethiopian triumph traveled through the early global cities of Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome into the world.

⁷¹ The location of the ark of the covenant is not known today, although speculation continues. According to midrash, the ark was hidden in a cave before Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians invaded in 586 BCE and has not been seen since. The Ethiopians claim to have taken it before this date, from Solomon, who, if he existed, would date much earlier, around 950 BCE.

⁷² Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 105.

⁷³ Edward. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (London: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1968), 137.

The Women of the Kəbrä Nəgäst

Perhaps most striking about the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* is how this African Christian version of the tale of Solomon and Sheba differs from the Jewish and Islamic tales in its depiction of women. Unlike them, the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* centers on a sophisticated black queen. She is surrounded by characters with strengths and flaws, who participate in intellectual debates and express such complex emotions as longing and regret. Magic does not forward the plot in the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, only the real feelings and motives of a range of men and women. In the Jewish and Islamic versions an entirely different queen emerges, one who no longer appears as a historical woman—as she does in the Tanakh, the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, and *Antiquities of the Jews*—but as a magical being surrounded by talking birds, mythical beasts, and demons. The general encounter between the two royals is also quite different in the Ethiopian version. Jewish traditions focus on the queen's lack of womanliness (her hairy legs), Islamic traditions focus on her lack of sophistication (mistaking a mirror for a pool). Both suggest she is descended from demons.⁷⁴ Both suggest that she is uncivilized, has no sense of propriety, and is intentionally, if unsuccessfully, seductive. In the Ethiopian version she is a proper and powerful woman with a sincere interest in philosophy on a state visit with geopolitical consequences, not a silly celebrity exchange.

As Jacob Lassner has argued, in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions, the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is about “a crafty woman wishing to retain her independence and a privileged monarch anxious to subject her to his own authority.”⁷⁵ Both story traditions describe the queen as less powerful, ultimately, than the king. In the Jewish tradition, the queen represents “a dangerous attempt to subvert time-honored rules of gender” and demonstrates why “women must submit to men.”⁷⁶ In the Islamic tradition, the queen is not a real threat to Solomon, but only to herself, by being an unbeliever. The Islamic Solomon is always in control, unlike the Jewish Solomon, and the queen's masculine appearance is merely distasteful, not dangerous. The tradition is encapsulated by Muhammad's calm pronouncement

⁷⁴ The hairy legs and hoof-like feet are signs of the demonic, Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, x.

on the queen that “No society prospers that allows a woman to rule over them.”⁷⁷

In other words, the largest difference between the Ethiopian version and early Jewish and Islamic versions is that the *Kābrā Nāgāst* places an African woman at the heart of the story and that woman is not a seductive, demonic Lilith but a powerful, wise human being. The narrative stays largely with the thoughts and emotions of this noble woman who does not subordinate herself to a foreign nation in marriage but makes thoughtful choices that better the destiny of her own nation forever. This centering of Makadda rather than Solomon, and transferring the quality of wisdom from him to her, is distinctively Ethiopian.

As such, the *Kābrā Nāgāst* takes the familiar Middle Eastern tales of Solomon and Sheba and turns their discursive claims inside out. It posits the Ethiopians as the weaker sex and then recuperates that feminine force as transformative, the still eye of a global storm. In doing so, it both destabilizes the originary texts’ truth claims and appropriates those claims for itself. One result of this radical destabilization is that modern scholars find themselves in the position of insisting that the Queen of Sheba did not exist *and* that she came from Yemen. The *Kābrā Nāgāst*’s claims tangle so closely with the more culturally acceptable biblical claims that it prevents the knowledge-producing systems of western archaeology and history from functioning in a coherent way, torquing the genealogy of discursive transformation.

As the review of the plot and themes of the *Kābrā Nāgāst* makes clear, the text celebrates women’s generative power. In the final chapters, the four feminine figures of the text ascend to divine status through motherhood—Makadda, the mother of the second David; Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus; the woman in Proverbs, the mother of wisdom; and the ark of the covenant, the mother of the law. Each is a salvic womb that nourished the Word that saved the world. For instance, the ark of the covenant is repeatedly described in the feminine, as “Lady Zion, . . . the pure Tabernacle of the Law of God” (73). The ark held the first sacred text, the ten commandments. Makadda is another kind of tabernacle. In her dwelled the new David, the Ethiopians’ first savior. She says with wonder of her own anointing, “I went to sleep in the depths of the sea and not being overwhelmed with the water I dreamed a dream. And it seemed to me that there was a star in my

⁷⁷ Ibid., 52.

womb...and I saved myself by my confidence therein and not myself only but...[saved] all the men of my country" (154). Makadda's imagery of her womb containing a figure of light is reminiscent of some of the depictions of the Black Madonnas in Europe.⁷⁸ The Virgin Mary is the final tabernacle, somehow the fruit of the first, in whom "the Word of God, Christ...made a Temple for Himself" (179). Each of these feminine figures has the sacred task of carrying and bearing a holy text, their bodies discursive bindings, their wombs the bowl of life.

In gender studies, it has been common to state that celebrations of women's generative power are re-inscriptions of women's inferiority as mere vessels. But this Ethiopian text makes clear—through aligning the living women Mary and Makadda with the figure of Wisdom and the feminine object of the ark—that their power to generate is not limited to human reproduction but is linguistic, a replication of God's power to call the world into being through language. They do not propagate children so much as texts, enabling national identity and salvation through living words. The *Käbrä Nägäst's* euphoric descriptions make clear that these women are engendering goddesses. That their power comes not through (male) tools of military might or markets but through (feminine) language is the very mark of their being supra-human avatars.

Part of how we know that these depictions of women are radical is that later Ethiopian editors and scribes found them alarming enough to diminish. For instance, the *Käbrä Nägäst* repeatedly states that Makadda exceeds men in her wisdom or understanding. Yet, these statements of female-centric praise are often immediately followed by short parenthetical phrases contradicting them. For instance:

And as for thee, O my Lady, thy wisdom is good, and it surpasseth the wisdom of men. There is none that can be compared with thee in respect of thy intelligence, not only in the matter of the intuition of the women who have been created up to this present, but the understanding of thine heart is deeper than that of men, and there is none who can be compared with thee in the abundance of thine understanding, except my Lord Solomon. And thy wisdom so far exceedeth that of Solomon that thou hast

⁷⁸ See Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

been able to draw hither the mighty men of Israel and the Tabernacle of the Law of God (*italics mine*).⁷⁹

The insertion of “except my Lord Solomon” makes nonsense of the phrases appearing before and after that “none” are wiser and that her wisdom “exceedeth” Solomon’s. The emendations are probably insertions by later scribes attempting to dilute the worshipful sections on Makadda. They are not successful, as this passage proceeds to state that Makadda, not her son, is responsible for requisitioning the ark. Like the queen bee, her minions do her work, but it is she who “draws” power to herself. Even her son bows down to her, saying “Whatsoever thou commandest me to do that will I do. For thou are the head and I am the foot, and thou art the Lady and I am thy slave.”⁸⁰

To conclude, the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* centers on a triumphal African queen, a textual coup without many equivalents. In direct contrast to the Jewish and Islamic tradition, the African Christian tradition portrays the queen as the engine of a culture’s elevation. Her intelligence and wit make her attractive not threatening; her cultivation of the physical and spiritual wealth of her kingdom inspires the allegiance of her son. She is not a trickster, or a false wit, but an honorable woman who stands by her word, even when tricked. Whereas the Jewish and Islamic traditions are about restoring a natural order—men above animals, women below men—the African Christian tradition reverses the gender hierarchy. It represents a distinctive Queen of Sheba, one who was not demonic but pure, not subordinate but free, not naïve but wise. Neither the Jewish nor the Islamic tradition presents a black woman as more powerful than an eastern man. In this radical African rewriting of the biblical canon, she is.

⁷⁹ Budge, *KN*, 136–137.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

NOAH'S NAKEDNESS:
ISLAM, RACE, AND THE FANTASY OF THE CHRISTIAN WEST

Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham

Hay Moros en la Costa (Beware! There are Muslims
on the Coast!)

Jews and Muslims have more in common than any
religion, ever... Both Jews and Muslims don't eat
pork. We don't celebrate Christmas. We both use
'ccchhh' in our pronunciation. And we're both hairy
creatures of God.¹

This essay is quite simply an exercise in puncturing the fantasy of the Christian West. We begin by considering a foundational text in that fantasy, Genesis 9:18–29, the story of Noah's drunkenness and subsequent curse of Canaan, usually misnamed the curse of Ham. From there we move on to three moments of that fantasy in order to show that the very possibility of a Christian West relies as much on Islam as it does on Judaism. But let us lay out our basic argument before exploring its various dimensions: in the same way that the story of Noah's nakedness over-reaches itself to distinguish Israel from Canaan, thereby showing the very Canaanite-ness of Israel, so also the frantic effort of the Christian West to distinguish itself from the 'East,' in this case the Muslim East, shows through the effort itself that the Christian West relies for its very possibility on Islam. However, it is the subcultures of the West, often hidden from view, that show up the truth of the Christian West.

Noah and That Sweet Red Wine

But let us tarry for a moment with our text, Genesis 9:18–29. Here we find Noah planting a vineyard, his first act after the flood, and

¹ Ahmed Ahmed, quoted in Sadik H. Kassim, "Ahmad Ahmad: From Helwan to Hollywood," *Muslim Wakeup!* (May 1, 2004), <http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2004/05/002226print.php>.

drinking himself legless. Ham, his son, sees his father naked in the tent, sleeping off the drink, and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth. These two promptly grab a cloak, holding it over their shoulders and walking backwards so they wouldn't view the old man's nakedness (i.e. the family jewels) while they cover him with it. In response Noah blesses them when sober again and curses *Canaan* to be the slave of the other two:

Cursed be Canaan! A slave of slaves will he be for his brothers.

Praise Yahweh the God of Shem! Canaan will be his slave.

May God increase Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem.

Canaan will be his slave (Gen 9:25–27).²

Out of many features, two things interest us with this text. The first is the curious pace of narrative time: the initial impression is deceptive, for it all seems to happen in a rather concise time-frame from Noah's drunken sleep to the curse—perhaps no more than one afternoon to the following morning. But just when we feel comfortable with this little domestic scene, we find that our eye has passed all too quickly over the initial verses, especially: “Noah, a man of the ground (*Adamah*),³ was the first to plant a vineyard. And he drank from the wine and became drunk” (Gen 9:20–21a). The sparest of words for a much greater time span than the rest of the story—for it takes some years to prepare the soil, plant and nurture grape vines, harvest the grapes, tread them down and let them ferment before one take that first welcome sip. Noah must have been just a little thirsty after the wait. The story suddenly blows out and the little vignette concerning the cloak, nakedness and curse that seemed to be its main concern turns out to be but a moment in a much longer stretch of time. But once we have been alerted to the tension between these two elements of narrative time—the longer time has the briefest of descriptions whereas the short time of the incident takes up much more textual space in slow-moving detail—we begin to find other dimensions of narrative time. Does the text not also refer to the three sons of Noah as the seminal source of ‘all the earth’ (Gen 9:19)? And does it not close, or at least pause, with the brief mention of Noah's 350 years after the flood and 950 years of his life as a whole? We are quite clearly reading a text with epic pretensions, and it is in

² Unless otherwise specified, the biblical translations are by Roland Boer.

³ Noah is of course another *Adam*, another character made from *Adamah*, ‘ground’ or ‘earth’.

the context of such eons that the story of Noah's drunken nakedness takes on added weight.

If all this is not enough, then the text launches itself forward, into the genealogy of Genesis 10. For here the three boys, destined to generate 'all the earth,' do so with gusto in a genealogy replete with eponymous descendants including Egypt, Babel, Philistines and of course Canaan. Indeed, it is Canaan that is the second curious feature of our text. In Genesis 10:6 he is one of four sons of Ham; the others are Cush, Egypt and Put (Libya). Canaan then has his own sons who happen to be the various peoples such as Amorites and Jebusites with which the Israelites struggle when they seek to conquer and occupy the land of Canaan in the text of Joshua and beyond. But let us go back to Genesis 9, for even though he is all over Genesis 10, Canaan appears here, in the earlier text as well, particularly in the curse quoted above. It is an oft-made point that Ham does not actually get cursed in the text we quoted above. Canaan is the one who gets the raw deal, even before he is born. In fact, our story of Noah's nakedness is somewhat nervous about this little fact, and so we find the out-of-place genealogical note early in the story: "As for Ham, he was the father of Canaan" (Gen 9:18). For the dying breed of historical critical biblical scholars, this note is clearly an interpolation, but then the whole story is for them a later and rather ill-fitting narrative, generated to provide a context for the much older curse. Be that as it may, it does not answer the question: why Canaan? Why is *he* the one cursed and not one of the many others who descend from Ham? Why does the text bend over backwards to drag Canaan back in time, before he was born, so that he can be cursed?

Now, while we might entertain the thought that Noah's killer hang-over had something to do with his slip, it is, we suggest, no accident that Canaan appears in Genesis 9. For if we consider much of the recent work on the origins of Israel,⁴ then it becomes more and more clear that Israel arose out of a Canaanite context; or rather, that Israel was

⁴ See Philip Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995a), Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1998b), Niels Peter Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity*, trans. E.F. Maniscalco (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998a), Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1996).

part of a much larger Canaanite history. The evidence of early Israelite religion, culture and material practice indicates that it emerged from within Canaan and did not arrive, ethnically distinct, from afar. At a later time, when most of these texts were composed, drawing fragments from earlier oral and written traditions, it became much more important to retro-fit a distinct people into a 'history' that was all too often written from scratch. Rather than Israel being but one Canaanite group among many, Israel—in this complete retelling—becomes a people distinct from Canaan in every sense, ethnically, culturally, religiously, politically. And what better way to generate such an image of distinctness than by a narrative (the Exodus) that has them coming from outside? It is, in fact, an extraordinary political myth.

For this reason Canaan and no other must be cursed in Genesis 9:25–27. In fact, we don't really need the historical reconstruction we have suggested above, for the text betrays such a secret of its own accord. It over-reaches itself on a number of counts and then stumbles. First, Canaan is demoted in the genealogical pecking order, becoming a son of the son of Noah where he should have been the father of the Hebrews. Second, Canaan is then dragged back into a story that takes place—in narrative time—before he was born and is cursed for an act he did not commit. Thirdly, the text blurts out its secret in the very act of hauling him back into it, for is not Canaan the brother of Shem and Japheth? Genesis 9:25 reads: "A slave of slaves will he be *for his brothers*." The sons of Noah, another Adam, one of the ground (*Adamah*), are then Shem, Canaan and Japheth. Or, to put it more bluntly, Shem the father of the Hebrews, and Canaan the father of the Arabs, are brothers, hairy brothers, of the second Adam.

This foundational text, Genesis 9:18–29, loses its wind when we look at it more closely, but the contradictions that criss-cross it did not bother the subsequent appropriations of it. In an extraordinary colonization of a text that was not theirs, many Christians sidelined the Jewish and Muslim claims to it as sacred scripture and used the misnamed 'Curse of Ham' to characterize blacks, Arabs and then Muslims as their slaves, their servants. And then, after the long medieval appropriation of the misnamed curse, coming to a climax with the Crusades, we find that our text served plenty of overtime during the colonial debates concerning slavery in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the 'Curse of Ham' saturated both sides of the tense and bloody struggle over slavery in the United States, the one side using this text to provide sanction for slavery and the other seeking to overturn it. But in a dialectical twist,

that very appropriation by Christians replicated at a deeper level the logic of the text itself. For in the same way that the curse of Canaan effectively blocked the Canaanite nature of Israel, so also the Curse of Ham systematically excluded the profound Muslim contribution to the West. The effort to expel the Other from within actually marks in its very contradiction the inescapable role of that Other in the identity sought by means of the expulsion. In this way, Genesis 9:18–29 gives us the logic of the fantasy of the Christian West, a fantasy we will now trace in two moments, or two unexpected genealogical lines if you will: Latin America and Indigenous Australia. We are interested not so much in a narrative of the conflicting interpretations of this text, but rather in the underlying logic that it lays bare.

Latin America

We argue that the emergent West began with the expulsion of that which made it possible in the first place: the Moors in Spain. Following the conclusion of the Catholic Castilian ‘re’-conquest—or colonization, as many Andalusians would insist⁵—of the complacent Kingdoms of Moorish Spain with the capture of the last Muslim outpost of Grenada in the auspicious year of 1492, a merciless regime of what would now be called ethnic cleansing began. Several million Muslims and Jews—the children of Shem and Ham (or is that Canaan the brother of Shem?)—were either forced to convert to Catholicism, or flee. Even so, hundreds of thousands of resolutely Catholic *Moriscos*—‘Spaniards’ of (mixed) Muslim ancestry—were expelled as well, including priests, monks and nuns in a way that is eerily reminiscent of Genesis 9:18–29.⁶ The old Crusader fear of the Jew as Europe’s fifth column and ally of their Semitic cousin, the Arab, was raised again; and the fanatical Roman Catholic persecution of the Jews of Spain—*el judío traicionero*—was based in part on the belief that they brought the Muslims to Spain in an attempt to end their own persecution by the occupying Visigoth Catholics.⁷

⁵ Khalid Duran, “Andalusia’s Nostalgia for Progress and Heresy,” *Middle East Report* 178 (1992): 20–1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

All of this suppressed with exactly the same logic as the curse of Canaan the fact that Islamic Spain 711–1492 CE (and equivalents) served as an essential conduit for Classical Greek thought to be transmitted to the rest of Europe as well as being a grand centre of learning itself, where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in relative harmony.⁸ Little wonder the splendors of Islamic Spain and its cultural centre, Cordova, have become a contemporary romantic symbol for multiculturalism.

As Dussell notes, it was this process of re-Christianizing Europe that gave the nascent Castilian Spanish Empire the training in the fine art of genocide that they would soon turn against the indigenous peoples of what would come to be called 'Latin America.'⁹ But the curse of Canaan would not go away, for the first non-indigenous language spoken in the so-called New World was Arabic. On his fateful voyage, Columbus had with him *Morisco* navigators and a Spanish Jew named Luis de Torres serving as his translator. When they encountered their first indigenous tribe (in what is now the Dominican Republic) how else should Torres have greeted the chief than with the standard greeting of the *lingua franca* of the civilized world—'as-salaamu alaykum.'¹⁰

It is this rich, intertwined history of Islamic and Spanish culture that the growing numbers of Spanish-speaking Muslims are reviving in a movement that unmask the logic of the Christian West. And we find this precisely in the subcultures of Latin America. Thus, for many Latinos who embrace Islam, they do not 'convert' so much as 'revert' to what they see as their rightful religious and ethnic identity, stolen from them by imperialistic Catholics, first in Spain, then in the 'New World'.¹¹ Although Spanish speakers make up just 1% (12 million) of the 1.2 billion-strong *umma*¹² it is their thoroughly postmodern rediscovery and reimagination of cultures and identities, that the Christian West would probably like best forgotten, that makes them so remarkable.

⁸ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 378 and 85.

⁹ Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

¹⁰ Hisham Aidi, "Olé to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims," *Beliefnet*, (May 27, 2005), http://www.beliefnet.com/story/9/story_996_1.html. Note how this greeting—'peace be with you'—contrasts with what was soon to come; the Conquistadors *Requerimiento*: "We shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them" (Cited in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, 82).

¹¹ Hisham Aidi, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and 'Connected Histories'", *Middle East Report* 229 (2003), Aidi, "Olé to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims."

¹² Aidi, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and 'Connected Histories'", 43.

Much like the many heterodox strands within African American Islam,¹³ Latino Islam within the United States—home to a 40,000-strong community¹⁴—abides as a religion and identity in constant flux. Latino Muslims enjoy a sometimes uneasy *détente* with heavily-Catholic mainstream Hispanic culture, as well as members of the growing Pentecostal Latino middle class and the sometimes skeptical and longer-established Arabic and Southern Asian Muslim communities.¹⁵

Just as with African American Islam, *culture* just as much as religion is the realm of conflict and innovation within Latino Islam. As such, the logo of the *Alianza Islamica* in New York features the triptych of a Moorish Arab, an indigenous Puerto Rican Taino Indian and a black African¹⁶ in a deliberate move to reorient Latino culture away from Christian Spain and towards those whom Spanish poet Manuel Machado, as well as contemporary cross-cultural radicals, Rage Against the Machine¹⁷ and The Philistines¹⁸ call ‘the people of the sun.’ Ironically, at the same time that the ‘West’ is increasingly enthralled by Latin American culture—especially in the form of pop stars like Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez and Enrique Iglesias—Latin America and Spain are doing things a little differently. The Moroccan-based, Brazilian soap opera *El Clon*, Lebanese-Columbian singer Shakira and the increasing ubiquity of belly-dancing have lead to a quantifiable ‘Mideast fever’ in Latin America.¹⁹ Equally, in Spain (and throughout Europe) the popularity of the Spanish-based Arabic singer Hakim, Egyptian pop star Amr Diab and Algerian-French songwriter Rachid Taha²⁰ indicates that, as Palestinian-American rapper Iron Sheik notes on his website, ‘old Europe gets it.’²¹ Or, to put it in the terms of this essay, through its underground old Europe is waking up to its Islamic roots. Further, one of Spain’s most popular bands, Radio Tarifa—named for a fictional radio station in Andalusia, a postmodern-day Cordova, perhaps—seeks

¹³ Aminah Beverley McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41–94.

¹⁴ Aidi, “Olé to Allah: New York’s Latino Muslims.”

¹⁵ Aidi, “Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories’”, Daniel J. Wakin, “Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing,” *New York Times*, (January 2, 2002).

¹⁶ Aidi, “Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories’”, 44.

¹⁷ Rage Against the Machine, *Evil Empire* (Sony, 1996).

¹⁸ The Philistines, *The P Bootlegs* (2004).

¹⁹ Aidi, “Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories’”, 45.

²⁰ In his 1995 album, *Olé, Olé*, Taha explores many of the issues raised in this chapter, including the origins of the Spanish ‘Olé’ in the Arabic, ‘Allah’.

²¹ Quoted from his website on August 21, 2008, <http://www.ironsheik.biz>.

to recover the 'lost' Arabic and Sephardic influences in Spanish music.²² And, it is no surprise that Arabic influences have always been strong in the music of the Roma (*gitano*) people of Andalusia, who were resistant to Castilian nationalism and always excluded from the project of the Christian West.²³

Indigenous Australia

If this story of the underside of Europe and then Latin America is half-known, then that of indigenous Australia falls entirely outside the radar. For that curious south-east Asian country of Australia holds itself forth as the southern hemisphere's major outpost of the Christian West. But, for obvious reasons we have an interest in this strange part of the world, one that exhibits yet again the curious logic of the curse of Canaan. For there are similar, though distinct, connections to the ones we have drawn above with Latin America that can be made between the indigenous peoples of Australia and Islam. Just as the Andalusians, Roma and indigenous people of South and Central America were victims of the modernist-imperialist project of the Christian West, sections of Australia's Aboriginal community are looking to Islam as an alternative to Christianity—seen to be the ruling class ideology that colonized and disposed them. But there is also something of a buried history of Islamic influence on Indigenous Australians.

Three moments draw our attention: the Macassans, Afghans and the influence of African-American Black Power. Firstly, as early as the 1760s, Lord Dalrymple speculated that the indigenous people of 'New Holland'—as Australia was at that time known to Europeans—must be 'Mohammedans' (sic) because they practiced circumcision.²⁴ This was a step beyond the common observation of the early 'explorers' of Australia who commented that the Aborigines were most like the ancient Israelites in their many practices.²⁵ Long before European con-

²² Indeed, their song 'Osú,' a combination of Arabic-influenced flamenco and Colombian folk music, crescendos with the cry of 'Viva Grenada!'

²³ See, for example, Tony Gatlif's extraordinary film *Vengo* (2000). Gatlif's 2004 feature, *Exils*, in which two young French people (one an Arab, one a descendent of former French colonists) make a cultural pilgrimage to Algeria, is a film very much in the spirit of our article.

²⁴ C.C. MacKnight, "Macassans and Aborigines," *Oceania* 42, no. 4 (1972): 293.

²⁵ See Roland Boer, *Last Stop before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, second ed., *Semeia Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 58–67.

tact with Australia's Aborigines, the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land traded and interacted with the Muslim Macassan people of what is now Indonesia. The Aborigines did not see the seasonal visits of the Macassan fishermen as a threat to their sovereignty or their livelihood, unlike their attitude towards the British colonists, and it is viewed as something of a golden age in contrast to the later colonization.²⁶ There were lasting linguistic and religious influences as well. *Allah* became for the Yolngu the sometimes universal, sometimes personal or familial god *Walitha'walitha*. The ceremony re-enacted by Aborigines of Echo Island in Indonesia in recent times as a cross-cultural exchange originally served as a reminder for the Yolngu that they were a part of a greater community united under the single law of *Walitha'walitha / Allah*.²⁷ Just as Australian state governments outlawed trade between Asian and Aboriginal people to benefit White enterprises²⁸ knowledge of *Walitha'walitha / Allah* was hidden from later generations of Yolngu to benefit to promulgation of Christianity.²⁹ Of course, both Aborigines and Indonesians continued to interact, in defiance of Australian law, in what is one of several "cultural convergences...based on shared political strategies of resistance."³⁰

The second instance of connection and mutual resistance by Indigenous and Islamic peoples came with the arrival of central Asian (metonymically labeled 'Afghans') cameleers to Central Australia in the middle of the 19th Century. Whilst the 'Afghans' were a necessary part of the British colonial process, opening up the remote and harsh desert, the 'Afghans' were culturally and socially shunned by the white communities and found themselves with far more in common with Aboriginal communities.³¹ Just as interactions between Aborigines and Macassans were outlawed by Australian governments, 'Afghan'-Aboriginal relationships were strictly prohibited by many state governments. Despite this, descendents of 'Afghan'-Aboriginal relationships

²⁶ Ian S. McIntosh, "Islam and Australia's Aborigines? A Perspective from North-East Arnhem Land," *Journal of Religious History* 20, no. 1 (1995): 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Peta Stephenson, "Islam in Indigenous Australia: Historic Relic or Contemporary Reality?," *Politics & Culture* 4 (2004), <http://aspen.conncoll.edu/politicsandculture/page.cfm?key=360>.

²⁹ McIntosh, "Islam and Australia's Aborigines? A Perspective from North-East Arnhem Land," 74.

³⁰ Stephenson, "Islam in Indigenous Australia: Historic Relic or Contemporary Reality?."

³¹ *Ibid.*

are today a part of the c. 1000 member Australian Aboriginal Muslim community.³²

However, most Aboriginal Muslims in Australia today are recent converts. Central to the decision to convert is the always-open wound in Australia, race. Aboriginal convert Kaled bin Walid, for example, cites the chilling retort offered to him by a white foster parent when he was 13. Because he was “a descendent of Ham,” he was told, he “and other blacks were cursed to be servants of the white race.”³³ In the same way that African-Americans became attracted to the militantly anti-racist ethos of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s, Aborigines in Australia are turning to Islam in protest against the white-Christian ruling class and indeed against the overwhelming Christianization of Aborigines themselves.

Here, in this third moment of Aboriginal Islam, the influence of African-American Black Power runs deep. In his controversial 1998 visit to Australia, Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan was warmly received in the indigenous ghetto known as the ‘The Block’ in inner-city Sydney as well as at the suburban Lakemba mosque, home to a diverse community of Middle Eastern, South Asian and indigenous Muslims.³⁴ Further, in February 2004, when a young Aboriginal boy was killed after crashing his bicycle whilst fleeing police in ‘The Block,’ the ensuing race riot was immediately likened to the Palestinian *Intifada*.³⁵ Local elder Lyall Munro went so far as to say, “If Palestinian kids can fight war tanks with sling shots, our kids can do the same.”³⁶

If, in the Americas, it is the ‘Trojan Horse’ of Arabic and Black culture that introduces Islam to a wider audience, in typical Aussie fashion it may be sport. Former Rugby League star turned boxer, Anthony Mundine, is Australia’s highest profile Aboriginal Muslim, and, given his success in two sports and his Ali-like talent for self-promotion, he is one of Australia’s highest profile athletes *tout court*.

³² D. Jopson, “Spiritual Warrior for Islam,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 27 2003.

³³ Cited in Stephenson, “Islam in Indigenous Australia: Historic Relic or Contemporary Reality?”

³⁴ Nadia Jamal, “Aboriginal Misery Is Shame of Australia, Says Farrakhan,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 16 1998.

³⁵ Martin Daily, “Eruption Was a Long Time Coming,” *The Age* (February 21 2004), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/02/20/1077072838613.html?from=storyrhs>.

³⁶ Miranda Devine, “Between the Rocks and a Hard Place,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19, 2004.

Mundine, who converted after reading Malcolm X, stated the obvious when he declared, "being indigenous and being Muslim, you know, are not really two good combinations in this society."³⁷ Yet he was highly criticized when he asserted that the policies of the United States lead to the September 11 attacks.³⁸

Conclusion: A Very Different West

In the 18th Century, Islam was championed by many reformists and radicals in the Christian West for its purported rationality—the leading political idiom of the period. In the post-colonial era, it was Islam's profoundly anti-racist message that caught the attention of radicals in the Christian West, such as Malcolm X.³⁹ Today, in what appears to be a new age of Western expansion and cultural and economic hegemony, it is Islam's opposition to this imperialism that is catching the attention of radicals in the Christian West.

The curse of Canaan has come a full turn; or, if you like, the Trojan Horse of the Christian West is beginning to spill its contents. During the first age of Western Imperialism, it was the modernist-imperialist projects that propelled the study of Islam and Islamic cultures in Europe.⁴⁰ While this drive remains strong in the proliferation of neo-conservative Orientalists and 'think tanks' in the United States and Australia, today it seems that knowledge and embracing of Islam functions as a distinct anti-imperialist statement, especially by subcultures and marginalized groups. Unlike the first age of Western Imperialism, it is not primarily the administrators of the modernist-imperialist apparatuses who are at the forefront of Western explorations of Islam; rather, it is the *victims* of that first wave of Western Imperialism who have the most to say to the West about Islam.

Further, if it is the marginalized communities of the Christian West where Islam has the most relevance today, then it is no surprise that

³⁷ Julie Nimmo, "Islam Dreaming," in *Insight* (SBS Television, 2003).

³⁸ Kathy Marks, "Militant Aborigines Embrace Islam to Seek Empowerment," *ENIAR* (*European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights*) (February 28 2003), <http://www.eniar.org/news/independent8.html>.

³⁹ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Secker & Warburg, 1966).

⁴⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 209–225.

within marginalized and oppositional (sub)cultures Islam is also gaining prominence. It is now common (and, to some, deeply disturbing) knowledge that American *Talib*, John Walker Lindh, captured fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan, first encountered Islam through hip-hop. Islamic and quasi-Islamic influences in 'mainstream' hip-hop abound, from Eric B & Rakim, to Public Enemy, Wu Tang Clan, A Tribe Called Quest and Mos Def.⁴¹ Further, explicitly Islamic hip-hop is now also a prevalent cultural commodity, through such groups and Native Deen and Sons of Hagar in the United States, Blak Stone in the UK and Outlandish in the Netherlands, although it is still ghettoized both literally and figuratively. Equally, punk and hardcore music—traditionally seen as thoroughly nihilistic and self-destructive—now have clear Islamic components. Progressive Muslims are seeing increasing links with the hardcore scene-based 'straight edge' (sXe) lifestyle movement that shuns alcohol, drugs, 'promiscuous' sex and often meat in a heady anti-consumerist brew.⁴² What's more, if the FBI—let alone the mainstream American media—ever find out about 'Bwoston'-based queer-friendly Muslim punks, The Kominas, and their cover of The Ramones' classic 'I want to be Sedated,' 'I want to be *Shahided* [Martyred],' then excrement will definitely hit cooling device.

In all these instances of Islam unifying with and influencing marginalized communities and groups—indigenous people, immigrants, blacks, rappers, punks—the outcome for the Christian West is much the same. The fantasy perpetuated for hundreds of years that the fabricated 'West' was somehow separated and distinct from Islam, or indeed was constituted by the widely perceived threat of Islam whose high point came with the Crusades, is shown up as little more than a fantasy. Rather, the West is unimaginable without Islam. The more the ruling classes try to marginalize and demonize Islam in the same way that they have marginalized and demonized indigenous people, blacks, queers and any counterculture of note, the stronger the ties will become. What will result will be either a clash of loosely-connected, contradictory but supportive subcultures, or, preferably, an end to the fantasy

⁴¹ Recently seen swilling beer whilst playing Ford Prefect, in the American film version of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

⁴² See for example, Michael Mohammad Knights's hilarious and brilliant self-described 'evil Muslim punk novel' *The Taqwacores* (New York: Autonomedia, 2005).

of the Christian West and the rightful return of Islam to a 'West' that is 'more compassionate and free'.⁴³ Or, if you like, the curse of Canaan may finally be undressed and, like Noah snoring away in his tent, show the hidden roots of a Christian West.

⁴³ Aida, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and 'Connected Histories'," 42.

SUPPLYING THE MISSING BODY OF ONESIMUS: READINGS OF PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Colleen M. Conway

Introduction

The Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon is just that—a letter. It is a personal letter to a “dear friend” about a particular situation that involves Paul, Philemon and a certain man named Onesimus. Overall, it seems to be a quite private letter as well, except for the fact that Paul addresses others in the opening, including the Christian community that meets in Philemon's house. Reading this bit of ancient mail reveals a delightful side of Paul. His letter, though quite brief, is filled with word plays, irony, and wit. For example, Paul plays on the Greek name Onesimus which means “useful” when he writes “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me” (v. 10).¹ When Paul offers Philemon the equivalent of an “I owe you,” promising to repay anything that this Onesimus might owe Philemon, he dryly adds, “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self” (v. 19). Paul speaks to Philemon as a parent might appeal to the best instincts of her teenager, “Confident of your obedience, I'm writing to you, knowing you will do even more than I say” (v. 21). In case Philemon was preparing to do less, Paul adds one more thing, telling Philemon to prepare a guest room for him since he will likely be coming to visit him (or check up on him) soon (v. 22).

All this is clear enough and the reader can enjoy Paul's wit and aplomb in dealing with Philemon. But who is this Onesimus? What is his relationship to Philemon and what exactly does Paul expect from Philemon? That is not at all clear from the letter.

To be sure, there is a traditional interpretation of the occasion of the letter. Beginning at least since the 4th century CE, Onesimus was understood to be a slave who had run away from Philemon, perhaps

¹ All biblical translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

stealing something from him as well. He has come into service to Paul during Paul's imprisonment, but Paul is legally obliged to send the runaway Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon. In this view, the letter is understood as an appeal for clemency on Philemon's part. More recently, this traditional reading has been challenged by several different scholars who suggest that Onesimus was not a fugitive at all, but perhaps a servant sent by Philemon to assist Paul or maybe an estranged brother of Philemon.²

The point of this essay is not to offer an argument for one particular reading over another. It is not to discover what Paul really meant, or who Onesimus really was. Instead, the focus will be on the nature of this text as a both a personal letter about a particular experience in the life of Paul and an authoritative canonical text. The discussion will be guided by ideas raised by the literary perspective known as the New Historicism. While a full scale explanation of this perspective is not possible here, I will highlight some ideas that are of special interest in exploring Paul's letter to Philemon.³

In Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher's, *Practicing New Historicism*, the authors speak of their attraction to the historical anecdote. They have in mind a type of story that is not located in a recognized authoritative text, that is, in "literature," in the formal sense, but one discovered perhaps in a captain's ship log, or someone's personal diary. This interest in the anecdote is a sign of the New Historicist's commitment to particularity. As Greenblatt and Gallagher explain their use of the anecdote, "We wanted to show in compressed form the ways in which elements of lived experience enter into literature, the ways in which everyday institutions and bodies get recorded."⁴ Conversely, they are interested in showing how the language of the literary plays out not only in public, but also in private, intimate moments. In short, New Historicists introduce the anecdote into their literary analysis to produce a "touch of the real." They want to find real bodies and living

² For the first argument, see Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987). For the second, see Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

³ For an accessible introduction to New Historicism see John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

⁴ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30.

voices from the past, or "at least seize upon those traces that seem to be close to actual experience."⁵

For New Historicists, turning to the anecdote means an escape from conventional canonicity (they no longer are looking only at "literature"). It involves examination of non-literary, non-canonical material to see how it might inform the long established cultural truths that the traditional literary canon purportedly conveys. At the same time, a New Historicist approach results in a reinforcement of canon since it is inevitably interested in reading canonical literature alongside this non-literary material. Thus, Greenblatt and Gallagher speak of their work as both a transgression against the domestic and a safe return to it.⁶

If we turn to Paul's letter with such interests in mind, we are confronted first by the reality of the letter's double status. That is to say, on the one hand, it is a text born out of a very particular experience—out of the lived experience of Paul. Not only that, what we have in Paul's Letter to Philemon is a letter about a real body, *somebody* named Onesimus. As far as we can make out, the letter concerns what is to become of this particular body. Thus, Paul's letter seems to be the very type of material to which a New Historicist might turn to find a "touch of the real." On the other hand, to turn to Philemon would not provide an escape from canonicity, since canonical authority is also a significant part of the letter's identity. There is no way to read the particularity of the letter *alongside* canonical literature. One must deal with the fact that we have such personal and anecdotal material as *part* of the canon. This, then, is the focus for this rest of this essay. It explores the implications of Philemon's double status as both a strikingly particular text (anecdotal, if you will) and as a text bearing canonical authority. In particular, the essay will consider how the history of the reception of Philemon has been affected by its dual identity.

The Early History of Paul's Letter to Philemon

Some of the earliest readers of the letter seemed well aware of the difficulties posed by its double status. As a result, the letter initially clung to the canon by a rather tenuous thread. While Philemon is present on Marcion's list, evidence from both East and West suggests there

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 47–48.

were questions about its inclusion in the emerging canon.⁷ The writings of three 4th century church leaders, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia (from the East) and Jerome (from the West), all reflect the dispute. At issue was whether a letter regarding the relationship between a master and his slave was of perennial significance. Some protesters questioned the authenticity of the letter, arguing that the subject matter was too trivial to have been taken up by Paul himself. Others granted that Paul wrote the letter, but deemed it too brief and insignificant to be edifying.⁸ For example, John Chrysostom points out that some say that Paul simply “is making a request about a small matter in behalf of one man,” and therefore the letter should not be included in the canon.⁹ In short, early readers seemed well aware of, if not appreciative of, Philemon’s particular nature.

What saved Philemon appears to be a fourth century monastic movement that attacked traditional social structures, including marriage and slavery. Both John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopseustia speak against the movement in commentaries written on Philemon. Chrysostom cites those who claim that “Christendom has brought into life the overthrowing of all things,” including masters having their slaves taken from them. These are people for whom “violence is the solution.”¹⁰ It is not clear to what violence Chrysostom refers, but he is clearly unhappy with the prospect of masters losing their slaves. Similarly, Theodore complains that a great many of his contemporaries “upset all things of the present life” because “they no longer distinguish between slave and master, rich and poor, those subjected to rulers and those ruling over others.” Enter Paul’s letter to Philemon. It is in the midst of this context, that a letter that seemed formerly useless to many became quite useful in the hands of Chrysostom and Theodore. Both understand the letter to underscore the necessity of obedience on the

⁷ Marcion was a 2nd century Roman Christian who was among the first to offer a list of writings to be considered authoritative by Christians. His list was quite short (essentially, the Gospel of Luke and the Letters of Paul) and he was deemed a heretic by the emerging orthodox church.

⁸ Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 202–203.

⁹ John Chrysostom, “Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 545.

¹⁰ Quoted in Barth and Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 203, n. 87.

part of the slave. Indeed, it may have been these writers who helped the letter gain sure footing in the canon.

But what if we dwell for a moment at the place where the letter had not yet found stable canonical ground? Insofar as they viewed the letter as private and trivial, the opponents to whom Chrysostom and Theodore bear witness highlight the text's distinctive status vis-à-vis other canonical literature. It seemed out of place as it tried to assume its place with other canonical writings. Again, it seems the very type of material that would inform a New Historicist's work. Indeed, such material would be of interest especially if it could serve as a counter-history—a piece of real life that would undermine or destabilize certain “cultural truths.” Considering this aspect of the letter would lead us to consider its potential to stand as a counter-historical presence despite its inclusion in a traditional authoritative canon.

But here we run into another difficulty. Because Paul is less than explicit about his wishes, because we have only this trace of the Paul-Onesimus-Philemon triangle, what remains of the letter is cryptic at best. Indeed, the letter is so cryptic that it is hard to predict what truth the text may challenge at any given moment. The letter retains an inherently instable quality. Having gained a foothold in the canon, it is a loose cannon. One can never be sure at what truth it might take aim. In the next section, I examine this textual instability as it presents itself at a time when real life was intersecting with Paul's Letter to Philemon on a daily basis.

Supplying the Missing Body of Onesimus in the Antebellum Period

Following the example of New Historicists, I begin with an anecdote. Albert Barnes, an American minister writing in 1857 recounts the following experience:

About twelve or fourteen years [ago], as I was entering the gate of my church, to go into my study, early in the morning, a fine-looking coloured man, apparently about twenty-five or thirty years of age, met me, and told me that he was a runaway slave, from Maryland, and wished some assistance. Influenced by feelings which commonly prevailed at that time, and, as I then thought, in accordance with the Bible, and probably having [the] case of Onesimus in my eye, I endeavoured to show him the impropriety of his leaving his master, and to convince him that he ought to return. But I could make not the least impression on his mind, and all my arguments had no force in his view whatever. [...F]rom that case I

am satisfied that it would be no easy thing to persuade a man, who had escaped from bondage, to return to it, even on apostolic authority. What slave has there ever been in the world, who has been induced to return by any such reasoning?¹¹

This story appears as a footnote in the Rev. Barnes book titled, *Scriptural Views of Slavery*. In the midst of his analysis of Paul's letter to Philemon, Barnes inserts this personal anecdote. For Barnes, this experience of the "real" was enough to convince him that the traditional reading of Philemon was untenable. He asks, "What probability is there that [Onesimus] would have been so pliant and passive as to return to a state of slavery? How many runaway slaves are there now, who would return to their masters on being merely *told* to do so? Who ever saw one that would be willing to do it, even on the authority of an apostle?"¹² Barnes goes on to conclude that the principles laid down in this epistle to Philemon would lead to the universal abolition of slavery.

Of course, there are other sorts of personal experiences from this period in American history, leading to very different conclusions about the letter to Philemon. Throughout the South, the letter would have been read alongside newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves. That such advertisements were as common as used car ads are today is clear not only by their volume, but also by their standardized format. Often there was a symbol in the margin of each ad, indicating at a glance whether the ad describes a male or female runaway. The advertisements also related the relevant information about the fugitive slave in a standardized way—the identity of the owner, followed by the description of the runaway, the amount of the reward for capture and return, and sometimes mention of thievery.¹³

One can imagine that it is alongside ads such as these, that a certain Rev. George Junkins read the letter to Philemon as Exhibit A for "the pilfering character of runaway slaves." Junkins explains that, "Onesimus had taken the precaution, in our day given as advice by some abolitionists, to supply his pockets, from his master's stores before he left him."¹⁴

¹¹ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Parry and McMillan, 1857), 324.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See the informative collection in Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, 4 vols. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1983).

¹⁴ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: Or, the Origin, History, and Fortunes of the Negro Race* (Louisville: J.F. Brennan, 1851), 546.

He goes on to point out the strong contrast between the morality of the New Testament and that of abolitionism. Abolitionism "encourages the slave to disobey, to steal, to run off; whereas the New Testament [in this case, Paul's letter to Philemon] commands him to return, to be honest, to be obedient."¹⁵

What readings such as this reveal is a history of attempts to erase the letter's cryptic quality by supplying the body of Onesimus. Indeed, whether Onesimus be a fugitive slave, a sent servant or an estranged brother, commentators have long supplied his missing body in an attempt to bring stability to the reading of this text. Much like the New Historicist in search of a touch of the real, readers of the letter of Philemon have looked for a real body to fill in for Onesimus's long absent one. So in the case of the first anecdote, a "fine-looking coloured man" asking for assistance provided the Rev. Barnes with a real body in place of the textually abstract Onesimus. For Barnes, this touch of the real entered the Letter of Philemon and a voice which refused to return to slavery disrupted the flow of the traditional reading of that letter as support for the social status quo. Thus, Philemon's counter-historical potential begins to reveal itself.

In the second instance, the daily newspaper supplies the body of Onesimus, while simultaneously removing its particularity. The body is supplied by means of the individual description of the runaway slaves in all their uniqueness (skin color, scars, clothing, facial features). But, the standardized icon in front of each ad reads against particularity. The individual body of a slave becomes a token of all runaways. So too the particularity of Onesimus is lost. For Rev. Junkins, Onesimus is illustrative of all "pilfering" runaways. Similarly Bishop Lightfoot, an esteemed biblical commentator writing in 1875, offers a description of Onesimus as "the least respectable type of the least respectable class in the social scale—he was a thief and a runaway. His offence did not differ in any way so far as we know, from the vulgar type of slavish offences."¹⁶ (310). Thus, according to Lightfoot, Onesimus flees to Rome "the natural cesspool for these offscourings of humanity" and there encounters Paul.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 9th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1890), 310.

Alongside these two encounters between life and text, we add a third. Here is yet another anecdote, but one that relates an attempt to deny, rather than supply a real body for Onesimus. This story comes from the Tenth Annual Report of the "Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia." from the missionary Rev. C.C. Jones as reported by Albert Barnes:

Allow me to relate a fact which occurred in the spring of this year, illustrative of the character and knowledge of the negroes at this time. I was preaching to a large congregation on the *Epistle of Philemon*: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of *running away*, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared 'that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible'; others, 'that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again!'¹⁷

From the perspective of these slaves, there was no need to supply a body for Onesimus. Their own enslaved bodies were perhaps all too real. Just as real, was their understanding of the Bible as a liberating and revelatory word. Given both these realities, they could only deny the existence of Paul's letter and with it, the body of Onesimus. They concluded that there could be no letter about a runaway slave returned to his master in the Bible.

In short, from mid-19th century America we find readings and responses to the letter that 1) see it as advocating universal abolition, 2) see it advocating submissive obedience, or 3) refuse to see it at all, denying its existence in the Bible altogether. Thus we see how the letter's canonical status calls for its consideration in the midst of the slavery debate, but its personal, anecdotal qualities make it an unstable authority at best.

If we look again at the use of Philemon in this period, its instability becomes apparent in another context. With 1850 came the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, a law which required "all good citizens" to aid federal marshals in the capture of alleged fugitives. As Laura Mitchell states, "Prior to 1850, northerners could walk away from a fugitive slave, but with the new law, they potentially became slave-catchers

¹⁷ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 319.

themselves" (Mitchell 135). Such a context seems ripe for the evocation of Philemon from preachers on both sides of the issue. In reality, it appears that the letter was avoided more than utilized.

According to the Mitchell's analysis, of the seventy plus sermons about the fugitive slave law published in late 1850 and early 1851, only a handful of sermons drew on Philemon.¹⁸ Just where we might most expect its application, in sermons dealing with a law about runaway slaves, it seems that evoking the letter was perceived as too risky. Notably, this is the case for sermons on both sides of the issue—neither pro-rendition (those in favor of returning escaped slaves to their owners) nor anti-rendition clerics were comfortable with using Philemon in the sermons about the Fugitive Slave Law. Mitchell suggests that ministers drawing on the epistle as a way to urge compliance to the law were confronted with a dilemma: Paul was a role model of one who had returned a run-away slave, but incurred a good deal of personal expense in doing so.¹⁹ In the traditional reading, Paul supported and educated Onesimus for some time before returning him to his master. Even more, he promised to assume his debt. Those opposed to the law had to contend with the fact that Onesimus was sent back. It is true that Paul's letter labels Onesimus as "more than a slave, a beloved brother" but, as Mitchell notes, this would not have played well, even in the North. The label blurs the distinction between master and slave, which in 19th century America, would also suggest a mixing of the races that even the North could not readily imagine.

Thus, for both pro- and anti-rendition clerics, Philemon presented insurmountable interpretive obstacles. It did so precisely because of its particularity. In the end, any attempt to undermine the opposition through use of this letter, could itself be undermined by the letter. Even more, to interpret this text to support one's position was to threaten and destabilize other cultural truths. Rather than risking this, clerics who wanted to argue for or against the Fugitive Slave Law tended to turn to more general biblical principles.

The letter to Philemon has been called a test case for Paul's position on slavery. But, from a New Historicist perspective, it is a test case of

¹⁸ Laura Mitchell, "Matters of Justice between Man and Man: Northern Divides, the Bible, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850," in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 146.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146–147.

a different sort. It stands as an example of how anecdotal material can disrupt the traditional interpretations of history, or standard versions of the truth. This case is especially interesting given the containment of the text in a canonical framework. What this essay has revealed is that in spite of its canonicity, this particular text, bearing cryptic witness to a particular life experience, continued to disrupt the cultural and historical truths of its interpreters.

REVELATION AND REVOLUTION:
LAW, JUSTICE, AND POLITICS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE¹

Regina M. Schwartz

For Alain Badiou, the contemporary French philosopher of the radical Left, a subject is what is summoned into being by a response of persistent fidelity to an eternally enduring “truth event” which breaks disruptively, unpredictably, into the given in all of its irreducible, incommunicable singularity, beyond all law, consensus, and conventional understanding. Badiou would argue that ethics is not the singular revelation of truth, but an ongoing process, that is, the process of remaining faithful to that truth. As Terry Eagleton summarizes, “It is a question of ‘persevering in the disruption,’ a phrase which clips together both innovation and continuity, visionary crisis and dogged consistency, or what in Badiou’s language would be the ‘immortal’ and the ‘mortal’... He wants, in short, to insert the eternal into time, negotiate the passage between truth event and everyday life, which is what we know as politics.”² While Eagleton calls this politics, Badiou truth, and Levinas justice, surely it is a description of Revelation, that radical cut into the everyday by a transcendent call to a higher ethics. The difficulty of being faithful to the event—of being just—preoccupies both the rest of the biblical narrative after the portrayal of the revelation, and that difficulty has also preoccupied subsequent human history—in this sense, the revelation is indeed understood as a process, the process of struggling to remain faithful to the truth of the revelation.

While Badiou has no difficulty associating the truth-event with advent of Christ—he pursues the analysis in his book on St. Paul—he is notably less interested in the radical revelation that marks the Sinai event. And yet this revelation beautifully exemplifies his understanding: the narrative describes the creation of subjects who are asked to be

¹ This paper was first delivered at the MLA Conference in Philadelphia 2004. It is excerpted from Schwartz, “Revelation and Revolution” in *Theology and the Political*, ed. Creston Davis (Duke University Press, 2005). © 2006 Association for Religion and Intellectual Life. © 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning.

² Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent* (London: Verso 2003), 250.

faithful to the event—and it gives dire warnings of pseudo-events, fake truths, false idols. I hardly need to rehearse the aura of the exceptional that fills the narrative of the Sinai revelation, the radical break from the ordinary, from life as they knew it—with Moses leading them, not only out of Egypt, out of their habitual slavery, but also out of their camp in the wilderness to be suddenly subjected to a terrifying sound and light show: “now at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke, because God had descended on it in the form of fire. Like smoke from a furnace... Louder and louder grew the sound of the trumpet. Moses spoke, and God answered him with peals of thunder” (Exod. 19:16–19). The form of fire is indistinct; the voice of thunder is unintelligible. This is not a deity who is easily reduced to a being, or for that matter, to any concept of being. The Truth has no place in the prior situation: under the terms that reigned prior to revelation, this is unintelligible, unnameable, unthinkable. The demarcation of the place of the event also points clearly to its break with the prior situation: “God said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn this people not to pass beyond their bounds to come and look on God, or many of them will lose their lives... Mark out the limits of the mountain and declare it sacred’” (Exod. 19:21–24). In the philosopher’s language: A truth punches a “hole” in knowledges, it is heterogeneous to them, but it is also the sole known source of new knowledges.

The atmosphere at Sinai trembles with something else besides the shock of newness—with threat, with violence—but why? The people tremble before this God, begging Moses to intercede lest they die (Exod. 20:19). It seems that not only the message, but also the messenger is unbearable. Moses’ face is radiant from his encounter with God, and he must veil himself for others to even be able to withstand the sight of him. Only before God and before the elders, to whom he communicates this startling justice, is he unveiled. Why is the revelation of the law accompanied by such fury? With the entry of the demand for justice, the world changes decisively. Furthermore, because the subject who is created by this truth event did not exist prior to it, that justice commands the hearer to a terrifying moment of decisiveness: will he accept this call to justice, or turn away? The first answer is univocal and affirmative: when Moses relates the words of God to the people “all the

people said with one voice, "All that he has spoken we will do; we will obey" (Exod. 24:3, 7). "The term evoking obedience here [we will do] is anterior to that which expresses understanding [we will listen] and in the eyes of the Talmudic scholars is taken to be the supreme merit of Israel, the 'wisdom of an angel'.... This obedience before understanding is against Kantian logic, for this biblical ethic cannot be reduced to a categorical imperative in which a universality is suddenly able to direct a will. It is an obedience, rather, which can be traced back to the love of one's neighbor:... a love that is obeyed, that is, the responsibility for one's neighbor."³ The demand of Revelation, then, is not a list of rational universals—rather it is a "love of God that is obeyed."

Fidelity to this remarkable event proves to be difficult—a "difficult freedom" as Levinas refers to it. The wrong paths soon beckon. According to Badiou, there are three ways to betray the Event: disavowal, trying to follow old patterns as if nothing had happened; false imitation of the event of truth; and a direct "ontologization" of the event of truth, that is, its reduction to a new positive order of being. The Exodus narrative depicts the ancient Israelites betraying the revelation in every sense. They doubt the validity of event, murmuring "Is Yahweh with us or not?" (Exod. 17:7) and disbelieving: "you have brought us to this wilderness [not to emancipate us but] to starve this whole company to death!" (Exod. 16:3). They give their allegiance to a pseudo-truth, and they reduce their emancipation to an order of being—signaled by their creating an idol of gold: "They have been quick to leave the way I marked out for them; they have made themselves a calf of molten metal and worshipped it. 'Here is your God, Israel,' they have cried, 'who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" (Exod. 32:8–9). "Ontologization" is offered up as the danger of idolatry, of betrayal, of evil: "you know how prone these people are to evil," laments Aaron (Exod. 32:23). From another perspective, this is also the idolatry Paul engages in with reference to the Sinai event. By reducing it to prescriptions, to a positive law with rules, he also refuses the event of revelation, and he does so contrary to Jesus, who, like Moses, is faithful to that revelation: "I come not to oppose the Law but to fulfill it" (Matt. 5:17). For his purposes, Paul engages in three different contradictory betrayals of the Sinai event: he

³ Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (London: The Athlone Press, 1982), 146–147.

denies the enormity of its importance, he ontologizes it (as a system of universal rule-making), and then after reducing its significance, he claims it is oppressive (the yoke of the law).

When the revelation is betrayed in this way, it is destroyed (as the old Law becomes dead for Paul). And when the people of Israel are unfaithful to the Event, it disappears for them. The narrative depicts this as the destruction of the tablets, the destruction of the laws of justice. The Pauline example of the truth event is a sudden conversion that renders the new subject non-existent before, but the Hebrew subject is more complex: first he declares fidelity to the event, faith to the revelation—"all that he commands we will do, we will obey"—and then, despite the intention of fidelity, despite these promises, he backslides, betraying the true event with a false one (idolatry), falling victim to a failure of courage—"because there were no graves in Egypt, did you take us to die in the wilderness?" (Exod. 14:11). Paul well understood this subject and classified it as death: "Though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good thing I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. When I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me" (Romans 7:18–20). In Pauline terms, this is not a subject; this is sin.

In the Exodus narrative, Moses is offered in contrast to the people's response as embodying unswerving fidelity and missionary zeal on behalf of the truth, a true revolutionary set in relief against the backsliding people who were also given but cannot bear the difficulty of the truth. Moses demands fidelity to the Revelation, and only that fidelity can constitute the future community. Those who refuse become the enemy—not only to God in Levinas' reading, but to emancipation: "Gird on your sword, every man of you, and quarter the camp from gate to gate, killing one his brother, another his friends and another his neighbor" (Exod. 32:27). And so the Marxist Badiou need not frame Paul as Lenin; he could have turned to Moses as a revolutionary leader: his priesthood of believers is formed at the cost of brothers and sons (Exod. 32:29). The Revelation starts a Revolution.

But Moses demands fidelity to what? On the United States Supreme Court's building where a frieze in the east portico depicts Moses, among other historical lawgivers, holding up two tablets, the tablets are blank. The entrance door to the building's courtroom also has two tablets with the Roman numerals I through X on them, but no words. When the law-giving is renewed, instead of the finger of God writing on the

tablets, Moses does the writing, and the voice of God—never reified in stone—becomes the foundation of the oral Law, with authority equal to the written one. What he says is what the rabbis puzzle over. If, as I am arguing, what God offers is not merely a series of prescriptions, not “the yoke of law,” what does he confer in this breach with the past, and what is asked of the new subject? In fact, there is hardly any positive “content” in the Revelation as such even in the Exodus narrative. Levinas argues that in the living interpretation of the revelation, what is asked is not fidelity to any positive law, but to justice itself: the prior world is ruptured by the radical entry of the demand for justice. Just as the first “decatalogue” (Exod. 20) rehearses the need for fidelity to the lawgiver and respect for the other, so the renewed “ten words” (Exod. 34) concern remaining faithful—the demand of allegiance, to remember allegiance, to commemorate allegiance—with warnings and promised rewards. What is required is fidelity to the truth of revelation, to justice; hence, the warning is made again and again, in different ways, against false truth, idolatry. “You shall bow down to no other God” (Exod. 34:14), “you shall make yourself no gods of molten metal” (Exod. 34:17); and you shall remember the feast of unleavened bread that commemorates the exodus from the prior condition; you shall dedicate your first-fruits to God, dedicate a day in every week to God, the festival of harvest, three more days a year—that covers the “ten words” that are the terms of the covenant, all except for the last sublime metaphor for injustice: “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” What gives life cannot be used to deal death. Surely this image offers a love that is obeyed.

Levinas has seen this revolutionary aspect of the revelation, and by turning away from the understanding of the subject as solipsistic and instead constituting it by its responsibility for another, by justice, Levinas has not only delineated an understanding of the subject that is preeminently social, but also political (despite the frequent charge that his ethics lacks a politics). But political up to a point—the delimiting point is Levinas’ palpable suspicion of the political. Levinas’ distrust of the state is the distrust of someone who has endured the state crimes of the Nazis. “The police official does not have time to ask himself where the Good is and where the Evil; he belongs to the established power. He belongs to the State, which has entrusted him with duties. He does not engage in metaphysics; he engages in police work.”⁴ He fears that

⁴ Levinas, “Judaism and Revolution,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 110.

if in order to fight evil, we adopt the tactics of politics, we would find ourselves in the service of the state. How can we engage responsibly in political action when we cannot be sure about the nature of evil, about what is evil? Interpreting the rabbis, he writes that “unquestionably violent action against Evil is necessary. And we shall soon see that this violence takes on all the appearances of political action.”⁵ But he sees the rabbis seeking deeper understanding, insisting on asking how do you recognize evil? For Levinas, here “lies the difference between a police action at the service of the established State and true revolutionary action.”⁶

When Levinas explicitly distinguishes between the heirs of Abraham, the universal family of humanity, and the State, he does so nervously, knowing that this will make some readers unhappy, adding, “it is suggested by the text. Let not the worshippers of the State, who proscribe the survival of Jewish particularism, be angered!” “There is more in the family of Abraham than in the promises of the State. It is important to give, of course, but everything depends on how it is done. It is not through the State and through the political advances of humanity that the person shall be fulfilled, which of course, does not free the State from instituting the conditions necessary to this fulfillment. But it is the family of Abraham that sets the norms.”⁷ Privileging the “children of Abraham” over the State, Levinas takes pains to qualify that community as not a blood-group (this is not “petit-bourgeois racism and particularism”).⁸ So who are the heirs of Abraham? “Those to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, which one is never done with, an order from which one is never free... So defined, the heirs of Abraham are of all nations: any man truly man is no doubt of the line of Abraham.”⁹

What, then, is the relation of theology to politics? Of Revelation to Revolution? To approach this question, I want to turn, not to the constitution of the subject (Badiou’s preoccupation) or the constitution of the community (Paul’s preoccupation), because in the end these entities may be more indifferent for their political ends than these leaders

⁵ *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹ *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 109.

imagine. Instead, I want to turn to the question of justice, for it seems to me that this is the vital political and ethical concern.

In "Loving the Torah more than God," Levinas engages an anonymous text that offers itself as a document written during the final hours of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance by one "Yossel, son of Yossel."¹⁰ Doubts flow from his agony: "What can this suffering of the innocents mean? Is it not proof of a world without God, where only man measures Good and Evil?" But these "murmurings" do not issue in any idolatry or atheism; they take a very different turn from the generation lost in the wilderness. Instead of betraying the revelation in the midst of this horror, "Yossel, son of Yossel experiences the certainty of God with a new force, beneath an empty sky." This is not paradox nor blind faith, nor has despair driven him to irrationality. Levinas reads the empty sky as the opportunity for a full conscience: "if he is so alone, it is in order to take upon his shoulders the whole of God's responsibilities." An absent God becomes most immanent internally. God is no protector or savior, but is internalized as a moral principle that guides action. Humanity must create a just world. The Godless are redefined as those who do not have this. "The condition of the victims in a disordered world—that is to say, in a world where good does not triumph—is that of suffering." He quotes Yossel: "I am happy to belong to the most unhappy people on earth, for whom the Torah represents all that is most lofty and beautiful in law and morality.... Now I know that you are really my God, for you could not be the God of those whose actions represent the most horrible expression of a militant absence of God." Empty sky, full conscience. Levinas understands the wellsprings of Yossel's "confidence that does not rely on the triumph of any institution: it is the internal evidence of morality supplied by the Torah."¹¹

If the Revelation offers the gift of justice, it can either be accepted or refused, as the human history of failure and agony confirm. Neither Levinas nor the Hebrew Bible ever underestimate how difficult this gift of justice is. If the Bible portrays humanity as persistently failing, it also insists that the radical entry of justice into the world cannot be

¹⁰ *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990), 143. [The author of the text, unknown to Levinas since the work had several times been published anonymously, is Zvi Kolitz. The story's publication history is discussed by Paul Badde, "Zvi Kolitz," in Zvi Kolitz, *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1955), 1–12.—Ed.]

¹¹ *Difficult Freedom*, 144.

compromised with cheap solutions—what it calls idolatry. The gift of grace in Paul works differently, imputing righteousness through the death of Christ. What the gift of justice does, on the other hand, is present one with the harsh reality that only acts of justice performed by the subject, and only by him, can help to create a just world and only this can relieve despair. There is no other way out—no imputed righteousness, as in Luther. And this is what makes the covenantal demand of justice ultimately political: while Revelation is a radical rupture into the status quo, it does not offer a miraculous solution to human pain.

ANTONIN SCALIA V. JONATHAN EDWARDS:
ROMANS 13 AND THE AMERICAN THEOLOGY OF STATE

Jay Twomey*

So the powers that be left me here to do the thinking . . .
—Neil Young, “Powderfinger”

Soon after 9/11, Gerald Kieschnick, President of the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, told President George W. Bush: “You not only have a civil calling, but a divine calling.” He then “read from Romans 13, especially Verse 4,” Kieschnick later explained, noting “that God ha[d] given ‘the government official in authority’ the responsibility to protect and defend its citizens.”¹ The King James Version of Romans 13:1–5 has provided English speakers with a number of governmental tropes regarding “higher powers,” “the powers that be,” the governing authority that “beareth not the sword in vain.” The passage, in which Paul seems to tell the Roman community that civil obedience is a good theological virtue since God stands behind earthly rulers, has been a source of no little consternation for interpreters throughout the Christian tradition, perhaps because Paul himself was executed by the powers that be in Rome soon after writing this letter. Apparently, in the eyes of the state, he was classed among those “that doeth evil,” those upon whom the state, as “the minister of God,” according to Rom. 13:4, is “a revenger to execute wrath.” The odd thing about Kieschnick’s reference to Romans 13:4, however, is that it assumes the verse speaks to foreign rather than domestic policy, to the hunt for international terrorists, rather than the punishment of criminals like Paul—citizens of the states that punish them.² As a result, Kieschnick (perhaps unwittingly)

* I would like to thank Stephen J. Stein and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for generously sharing with me portions of Edwards’ “Blank Bible.” Although it has since appeared in print, Stein’s edition of the “Blank Bible” was still forthcoming in the Yale Works of Jonathan Edwards when I began this project. Thanks also to the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati for a grant in support of this project in its earliest stages.

¹ “Kieschnick meets with President Bush on terrorist attacks,” LCMS Press release, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/530835/posts> (accessed August 30, 2008).

² According to Acts 22:25, Paul was a Roman citizen.

assists in the redeployment of the rhetoric of Romans for U.S. imperial aims—Paul’s tropes for power relations within the Roman state system become: the war in Afghanistan, the war on terror, the war in Iraq, the war on... the war in....

Americans are by now accustomed to the politicization of religious discourse by the Bush administration.³ But even though Robert Bellah made it obvious nearly 40 years ago that U.S. officials, especially presidents, usually clamber atop that high wall of separation, rhetorically speaking, when the need arises to defend and promote the state and its organs and policies, many feel that religious language is more seriously functional in politics today than ever before.⁴ What’s more, many have felt, at least until quite recently, that religious conservatives in the United States, seizing their moment, have begun publicly, officially, to yoke church to state by means of a logic heretofore merely internal to Christian conservatism.

Certainly, there is something to the sense among moderates and liberals that the current powers that be, especially in the Republican party, take their cue not from the nation as a whole, but rather from religious conservatives, perhaps even a dark cabal of neo-Puritans,⁵ linking Justice Antonin Scalia, say, to the 18th century theologian Jonathan Edwards. Edwards’ *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is thus but a primer for Scalia’s hellfire dissent-sermon in *Lawrence v. Texas*.⁶ Scalia’s a Catholic and Edwards was a Protestant, of course, but according to this view they preach under the same tent, with the minister from Northampton, as it were, warming up the crowd for the Justice from Washington.⁷ But although such figures may seem to stand at opposite ends of American

³ For pertinent studies of Bush’s biblical citations, see Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2003) and Erin Runions, “Desiring War: Apocalypse, Commodity Fetish, and the End of History,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1:1 (Dec. 2004): 1–16.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96.1 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

⁵ See Julia Corbett, “The New Puritanism: We Must Say ‘No’ Again,” *The Humanist* 48:5 (Sept. 1988): 19–23, 38.

⁶ *Lawrence v. Texas* 539 U.S. 558 (2003), docket # 02–102. In *Lawrence*, the Court ruled a Texas anti-sodomy law unconstitutional. My citations from Supreme Court oral arguments are keyed to the Alderson Reporting Company transcripts, available as PDF files at http://www.supremecourtus.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts.html. The full text of Supreme Court opinions can be found at: <http://www.supremecourtus.gov/opinions/opinions.html>.

⁷ I have borrowed this image from Richard Brisbin who begins his comprehensive study of the political import of Scalia’s jurisprudence with an arresting image of Scalia as “a leading preacher in the conservative revival that is rapidly becoming the creed of

political history like twin bookends, I would argue that the situation is, and has always been, more complex than that. And I would wager that whatever religio-political *status quo* develops in these years will be less unified, more thoroughly fraught with contradictions, and thus more unstable, than this nervous—if sensible—rhetoric suggests. American religious traditions, even within conservative Christianity, have always been just that—a plurality of competing traditions, a set of recurring themes and options, debates and practices.

In fact, Scalia and Edwards, taken together, serve as a perfect example of this instability, the absence of an inexorable linearity in American religious history. Undoubtedly, each is an influential player in American religious discourse; and each, like Kieschnick, has redeployed the language of Romans 13 for what we might call an American theology of state. But the significance of their respective Pauline interventions is not that a long-suffering American Hezbollah has finally come into its own,⁸ but rather that the history between Edwards and Scalia is no indication of a shared intellectual heritage. Instead theirs are two entirely distinct perspectives, offering radically different visions of the nature of the relationship between God and governing authority, visions which, in the age of the “moral values voter,” ought to be given their agonistic day in court.

Justice Scalia’s contribution to an American theology of state was not too long ago on the minds of many since in 2005 it was whispered that he might be tapped as the next Chief Justice. The Court’s top post went to John Roberts, of course. But if Scalia had received the nomination, I expect that Senators in the confirmation hearings would have found themselves drawn unexpectedly to a sort of slippage between Scalia’s Establishment opinions and his separation-of-powers jurisprudence, for his reflections upon divine and executive authority are cut from the same theonomic cloth. To put it simply, Scalia thinks that government is God’s. In a 2002 essay entitled “God’s Justice and Ours,” he argues with reference to Romans 13 that “the core of [Paul’s] message is that government...derives its moral authority from God,”

the American political majority.” *Justice Antonin Scalia and the Conservative Revival* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 1.

⁸ As Gore Vidal almost put it, back in 1992, when he fretted about an American “party of God.” “Monotheism and its Discontents,” *The Nation* 255.2 (July 13, 1992): 57.

indeed that government in itself has divine backing.⁹ And in recent oral arguments at the Supreme Court Scalia indicates the extent to which he has adopted the Pauline vision as his own: the Decalogue, he says, is “a symbol of *the fact that* government comes—derives its authority from God;”¹⁰ its “message...is that law is—and our institutions come from God.”¹¹ More than likely Scalia meant to say that law, like our institutions, *comes from* God, not that law *is* God.¹² The uncertainty here is interesting nonetheless. Where does he draw the line? In what sense are the American government and its institutions from God? Clearly Scalia has in mind a dependency on the divine more robust and all-encompassing the concept of civil religion would allow, for Scalia can describe both God and the president in equivalent terms—God is a “unitary God” and the president is a “unitary executive.”¹³ Might this mean that each is merely a modification of the other? In Scalia’s view, it is precisely because government receives its power from God’s supremacy that it stands above the moral code by which individuals abide.¹⁴ And from his unique perspective, perched on the uppermost branch of the national tree, the divinely ordained ruler can “vindicate the ‘public order.’”¹⁵ Even if Scalia is not quite advocating theonomy (or agitating for a theocracy), the state in his theology is probably rather unlike the government in which most Americans think they participate at the polls. This is because, in Scalia’s view, “the emergence

⁹ Antonin Scalia, “God’s Justice and Ours,” *First Things* 123 (May 2002): 19. In context, Scalia says that Paul is speaking of government in general, “however you want to limit that concept,” or, one suspects, even if you don’t want to limit it at all.

¹⁰ *Van Orden v. Perry* 545 U.S. ____ (2005), docket # 03–1500, p. 16, ll. 9–11. This case concerns the display of the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the Texas State House. In his dissent in another Ten Commandments case, Scalia argues—incoherently, it seems to me—that because major figures in American history have sometimes invoked an extremely abstract deity, states should be able to display the religion-specific Commandments. See *McCreary County v. ACLU* 545 U.S. ____ (2005). Emphasis mine.

¹¹ *Van Orden v. Perry*, p. 29, ll. 20–21.

¹² Susan Jacoby argues that Scalia is indeed a “judge [who] interprets law as a manifestation of divine will rather than human intent.” “The God Squad,” *The American Prospect* 16.1 (Jan. 2005): 11.

¹³ Scalia refers to God as unitary in oral arguments in *Van Orden v. Perry* (pp. 4, 8–9). See Scalia’s dissent in *Morrison v. Olson*, 487 U.S. 654, 727, 732 (1988) for his claims regarding the “unitary executive.” The latter term is in part a sign of what Brisbin calls Scalia’s insistence upon “executive dominance in the relations among the branches” of government (121).

¹⁴ Scalia cites “a Supreme Court opinion from the 1940’s [sic]—‘we are a religious people, whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.’” “God’s Justice,” 19. The case in question is *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306 (1952).

¹⁵ Scalia, “God’s Justice,” 19.

of democracy" has actually been an impediment to morally functional government; it has "upset....the consensus of Western thought until very recent times. Not just of Christian or religious thought but of secular thought regarding the powers of the state."¹⁶ That consensus, needless to say, takes its cue from Romans 13.

The similarities between Reverends Scalia and Edwards are striking, including most importantly the recourse each has to the divine in articulating an American theology of state. Both Edwards and Scalia believe in a moral order which God has imparted to the cosmos. On certain days, Edwards would probably feel right at home in Justice Scalia's chambers. They are different in important ways, I will argue. But their differences are differences of degree, not of kind. Or, to put it more judiciously, Edwards, even if he might concur with Scalia's vision of government in its broadest outlines, dissents from Scalia in tone, in nuance, in emphasis.

According to Edwards' reading of Romans 13, God's merciful and caring providence ordered "that civil government should be maintained among [people] for the terror of evildoers and the praise of them that do well."¹⁷ Edwards' theory of the origins of government holds to a Calvinist/Hobbsian paradigm which opposes a brutish state of nature to the stability and the security provided by social order. In Edwards' view, revelation is the source of that order. Without revelation humanity "never would have rose out of their brutality." "Mankind would have been like a parcel of beasts," he says. "There would be uncertainty [about]...what was just and unjust...[about] how far self-interest should govern men.... [about] how far we ought to honor and respect and submit to our parents and other superiors." "Revelation redeems nations from a vicious, sensual, brutish way of living."¹⁸ But rather than seeing this state of affairs in Augustinian terms, as a consequence of the Fall requiring the punishing corrective of government, Edwards interprets Romans 13 to mean "that in the beginning of things God appointed civil government. He taught men to form themselves into civil societies, and to appoint judges and rulers, and that all nations derived the custom from thence."¹⁹ Putting the matter slightly differently

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957-), 24.2: 1031.

¹⁸ Ibid., at 13: 421-426.

¹⁹ Ibid.

elsewhere, Edwards reasons that because humankind is the pinnacle of God's visible creation, "God won't leave the world of mankind to themselves without taking care to govern their state, so as that this part of the world may be regulated decently and beautifully."²⁰ Revelation, then, within the sphere of social organization at any rate, is a divinely inspired sense of civil order which God, gauging their special status in creation, grants to human beings.

A supreme mismeasurement of man if ever there was one. Still, such is the foundational narrative upon which Edwards' thinking about government takes shape; and already the differences between his vision and Scalia's are becoming evident. Edwards' God is a benevolent maker who has provided humanity with an ideal model of order. That is, God does not necessarily operate in or just behind governing authority, as Scalia would have it. Rather, God provided humanity with a pattern of governance that, in its practical operations, is now wholly human. What Scalia seems to imagine is an onto-theology of governing power. He (mis)understands Romans 12:19 ("Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord") to mean that God is actively righting wrongs "in this world" through the state, possibly through *any* state.²¹ Edwards, on the other hand, posits a theological etiology of government, but does not suggest that any actually existing state is itself divine in any sense. On the contrary, for Edwards certain states may constitute, or participate in, "Satan's visible kingdom on earth"²² or may turn "the supreme power of the nation against us"—i.e., the church.²³ The relationship between government and divinity, thus, is not a given.

We can see this even more clearly in the ways Edwards thinks about governing officials. Certainly, Edwards sets very high standards for leaders. They are, he says, citing Psalm 82:6, "called 'gods, and sons of the Most High.'"²⁴ But precisely because of this, he continues, "it is particularly unbecoming them to be of a mean spirit."²⁵ That they *can* be mean in spirit, that some in fact do "grind the faces of the poor,

²⁰ Ibid., at 20: 97.

²¹ Scalia, 19.

²² Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 9: 446.

²³ Ibid., at 17: 368.

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, ed. Edward Williams and Edward Parsons (New York: Burt Franklin, 1817 [1968]), 8: 83–84.

²⁵ Ibid.

and screw their neighbors,”²⁶ would indicate that although leaders may formally be godlike—that is, although they play a role in human society analogous to God’s role in the cosmos—they are really only men following a model.²⁷ Their moral failures are especially unbecoming because of the grandeur and goodness of this model, not because they themselves are the passive vehicles of God’s just government.

In a similarly pragmatic vein, Edwards makes a distinction between “the civil interest of a people” and “those things which relate to conscience”—by which he means “the favor of God, and happiness in the other world.”²⁸ Rather than assuming, as Scalia does, that conscience, in Romans 13:5, simply indicates the moral responsibility believers have to challenge any effort to “obscure the divine authority behind government,”²⁹ Edwards suggests that the two realms are indeed separate. Insofar as Paul unites them in Romans, according to the subtext in Edwards, it is for the enhancement, the support of conscience. In other words, civil authority does not strictly speaking involve matters of conscience. Rather, it can protect people in the pursuit of conscience, so that they are “not . . . disturbed in their public assemblies for divine worship.”³⁰ Hence, in Edwards, government usefully serves the needs of believers not because its mandate from God certifies, as Scalia would have it, its own moral authority, but rather because it functions as a protector of a social stability within which believers can pursue their own, and God’s, moral ends.³¹

This distinction is not always so clear in Edwards, I admit. For example, Edwards, like Scalia, is not opposed to the execution of criminals, and for him as well capital punishment is a morally acceptable use of state power.³² In fact, in a comment on Genesis, and the murderous era before the flood, Edwards seems to conflate divine morality and civil

²⁶ Ibid. “Screw,” in Edwards’ day, was not the double-entendre it is now.

²⁷ Indeed, compared to God, earthly rulers are little more than “ants and flies” according to Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 10: 421.

²⁸ Ibid., at 13: 208.

²⁹ Scalia, 19.

³⁰ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 13: 208.

³¹ Even if helping morality along is a leader’s duty (ibid., at 17: 367). Gerald McDermott describes the duty this way: “the good ruler was expected to give friendly, but distanced, support to true religion.” *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1992), 134.

³² Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 23: 128. Amy Plantinga Pauw hints that Edwards may have thought of earthly punishments as a “correlate” to punishments in the afterlife. See her introduction to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 20: 22.

justice in saying that it was God who exacted revenge for murder when there were as yet “no human laws for putting murderers to death.” But notice, even here, the curious difference between God’s execution of murderers and villains in the Flood, and the way in which human authorities are to revenge the same kinds of wrongs. “But now,” Edwards continues, after the creation of civil authority “God establishes it as a rule, henceforward to be observed, that murder shall be revenged in a course of public justice,”³³ that is: by following standardized legal procedures, by public trial.

At such a trial, Edwards would not expect governing officials to “bear the sword in vain,” but rather “truly [to be] a terror to evil-doers.”³⁴ This allusion to Rom. 13:4–5 is nearly the exclusive focus of Scalia’s reading, but Edwards—remarkably, I think, given his reputation in American letters—shifts the emphasis entirely. Whereas Scalia consistently emphasizes Paul’s sword, Edwards focuses on good conduct, both in terms of rewards granted it by the state and in terms of its benefit to the state. Rulers are “ministers of God to his people for good.”³⁵ More than that: “goodness and royal bounty, mercy and clemency is the glory of earthly monarchs and princes....[because] God delights in the welfare and prosperity of his creatures.”³⁶ This is probably why “the Apostle tells us [that] one end of civil government [is], not only to be a terror to evildoers but to reward with honor them that do that which is good.”³⁷ That reward will manifest itself in the form of “god’s blessings,” which are “diffusive” enough in response to goodness and piety to overcome God’s repugnance for the evildoings of evildoers, even when those evildoers are heads of state.³⁸ This is true to such an extent that even “a poor man in a cottage that walks with God... may do much by his fervent prayers and more, it may be, than some of the great men with their power and policy.”³⁹

Whether any of this is indicative of democratic tendencies has been an open question for readers of Edwards. Some characterize Edwards’ God as a “tyrannical, arbitrary, prince” standing in staunch opposition

³³ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 15: 328

³⁴ Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, 8: 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, at 87.

³⁶ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 10: 424.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, at 17: 367.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, at 362–363.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, at 364.

to human freedom.⁴⁰ Others likewise argue that “that the real vitality in [Edwards’ vision of] government exists not in the dynamic relation between the governed and the governor, but solely in the power of the governor himself. Political rights and obligations descend, as it were, from above, not from the consent of the governed.”⁴¹ At the other end of the spectrum we have an Edwards who, principally because of the apparently classless and experiential nature of revivalism, was a key force behind “the [secular] American democratic impulse.”⁴² George Marsden is probably closer to the truth when he characterizes Edwards as “an authoritarian conservative and a revolutionary.”⁴³ Edwards, Marsden writes, could see the future coming, and it troubled him that people might forget that their “status was defined only in relation to the absolutely sovereign God and to the communities that God ordained.”⁴⁴ Certainly, given the catastrophe of Edwards’ “antidemocratic revision of [his] congregation’s government,”⁴⁵ the idea that one can find in his work an ardent supporter of government by consent seems a trifle naïve.⁴⁶

Still, it may be worth running the risk of naïveté in defense of Edwards, especially in comparing him to Scalia. That Edwards could be expelled, and moreover accept expulsion,⁴⁷ from his post by the will of his congregation was due not just to the dynamic nature of congregational polity, but perhaps also to Edwards’ own sense of the

⁴⁰ James Dana, a near-contemporary of Edwards, quoted in Allen C. Guelzo, “From Calvinist Metaphysics to Republican Theory: Jonathan Edwards and James Dana on Freedom of the Will,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56: 3 (July 1995): 413. Guelzo argues that an Edwardsean theological conservatism could in the end prove more democratic than systems, like Dana’s, which opposed it in the name of liberty.

⁴¹ Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards: Morality and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1973), 82.

⁴² Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966), 302. See also McDermott for whom Edwards—although ever the Puritan—was not unlike other “progressives” and “reformists” who contributed, very generally and indirectly, to revolutionary politics (128–136).

⁴³ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 370.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, at 439.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, at 345.

⁴⁶ In 1748, Edwards launched two major attacks on his congregation’s traditional policies. First, he suggested that disciplinary cases no longer be heard before the entire (male) church body, but rather that a smaller court of select elders would gather to pronounce judgment. And second, he tried to get the Northamptonites to revert to earlier (and much stricter) Protestant rules regarding church membership. This “conservative revolution,” as Marsden puts it, eventually cost Edwards his job (345).

⁴⁷ Marsden, 361.

difference between earthly leaders and God. In Edwards' theology of state, governors, magistrates, ministers and "kings of the earth...are not able to execute their authority in their narrow bounds, except by the power and assistance of their subjects."⁴⁸ While this may be a negative description of the inefficiency of human authority vis-à-vis God's total power, it can also be seen as a positive description of a certain species of checks and balances within earthly government. After his expulsion from the pulpit in Northampton Edwards may have come to rue the day two decades earlier when he had written "that when God threatens a people with being deprived of their public privileges, 'tis a loud call to reformation and repentance";⁴⁹ nevertheless the logic of that sentiment was activated most democratically by his own parishioners: as if they had been better readers of Edwards than Edwards himself, the good people of Northampton apparently agreed with their future ex-minister that when leaders "are not fit for their places, 'tis best they should be removed."⁵⁰

Despite the fact that both Edwards and Scalia are undoubtedly card-carrying members of the American "party of God," Scalia's understanding of leadership, I contend, has almost nothing to do with Edwards'. And the difference between them is most noticeable precisely here, in questions about executive power and its proper limits. In his oral arguments in *Cheney v. U.S. District Court*, Scalia declares that a president can resist checks on his authority from the other branches of government "whenever [he] feels that he is threatened" in his authority; that is, he can legitimately "say no, this intrudes too much upon my powers, I will not do it."⁵¹ Given what Scalia has said about Romans 13, about the full participation of the divine in governmental acts of vengeance, about *the fact that* our institutions and laws are God's, and about the mutual incompatibility of democracy and Christianity, his executive-dominant separation-of-powers jurisprudence, especially as reflected in his arguments in *Cheney*, ought to be a cause for concern. But while it is certainly tempting to blame Scalia's theology of state, as well as the crusader tonalities in contemporary U.S. political discourse,

⁴⁸ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 10: 424.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, at 17: 365.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 354.

⁵¹ *Cheney v. U.S. District Court* 542 U.S. 367 (2004), docket # 03-475, p. 28, ll. 4, 11-12. The anonymous questioner on page 28 is identified as Scalia in a variety of media reports as well as in the unpaginated transcript at: <http://www.oyez.org/oyez/resource/case/1715/argument/transcript>.

on “the biblical origins of American civil religion,”⁵² I think it is more productive to draw distinctions within the tradition first.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that one *must* search for alternatives within American Christianity, or conservatism, or for that matter in the work and thought of Jonathan Edwards, who was undoubtedly much more of a “maximalist” than Scalia is or ever will be.⁵³ But if one *were* to conceive of the United States government and its relationship to the divine in the terms of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, if one were to wander onto the national revival grounds in search of a good word, then one could do worse than Edwards’ democratically-inclined reading of that text, and of its first verse in particular, according to which Paul stresses the subjection, in Edwards’ interpretation, of “every soul,” in order to combat hubris, especially among the religious elite, and to keep such “men [from] overvalue[ing] themselves.”⁵⁴

⁵² Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 8.

⁵³ Bruce Lincoln proposes this term as a less polemical alternative to “fundamentalism.” Maximalism refers to “the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence” (5).

⁵⁴ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 24(2): 1031.

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